

inner voices

stories

kishori charan das

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INNER VOICES

Kishori Charan Das is one of the most celebrated writers in India today. He writes primarily in Oriya, the language of his native state. Born in 1924, in Cuttack, Orissa, he graduated from Patna University in 1942 with a degree in history and distinction in English and Sanskrit. He received his master's degree in history in 1942 from Patna University and in 1947 was awarded an LLB by Utkal University. He was employed in the Indian Audit and Accounts Service, from which he retired in 1982 as an additional deputy comptroller and auditor general of India, having served as accountant general of various states and the Central government.

Throughout his career as a civil servant, K.C. Das pursued a second career as a writer. He began to write poems and short stories in his early twenties. Although he has written and published stories, poems, and essays in English, the majority of his literary output is in Oriya. He has published sixteen collections of short stories, four novels, a collection of poems, and five volumes of essays. He is also a distinguished translator and has translated two English novels, Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* and Nayantara Sehgal's *Rich Like Us*, into Oriya. He has also translated several volumes of his own stories into English.

Kishori Charan Das received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976 for his collection *Thakur Ghara* (The Prayer Room). He was the recipient of the Sarala Puraskar in 1985 for *Bhinna Pamsa* (Other Ashes).

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Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd., Cnr Rosedale & Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

First published by Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, The University of Michigan 2000
First published in India by Penguin Books India 2004

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Perpetua by S R Enterprises, New Delhi
Printed at Chaman Offset Printers, New Delhi

To the memory of all those who lost their lives
in the cyclone of 1999 in Orissa and to the courage of
those who came to their aid

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Introduction

In the case of a writer as prolific as K.C. Das, and one who writes so honestly about his own work, it seems risky indeed to generalize about the work as a whole. Nonetheless, I would venture to say that the stories translated here are typical of much of his recent fiction. With the exception of 'Atonement', which appeared in *Thakur Ghara* (The Prayer Room) in 1975, the stories in this collection were all published in the 1980s. 'The Journey' is taken from a collection of that name published in 1980. 'The Jasmine Bud and the Servant Girl' appeared in the anthology *Bhinna Pamsa* (Other Ashes) in 1984. 'When God Is King' and 'The Lullaby' appeared in 1986 in the collection *Sita Lahari* (Cold Waves), while 'The Idol', 'Compassion', 'The Alleyway Cinema', and 'Mr Absent-Minded, His Wife, and Co.' all come from *Trayovimsamrtyu* (The Twenty-third Death), published in 1987.

The setting of the stories is urban, and most of the characters belong to the middle class, something that we might expect from what Das tells us of his choices as an author. K.C. Das has written extensively about himself as an artist. In an intriguing essay in English, 'Literature and Cultural Identity: How I See Myself in Relation to the Country I Live In (A Personal Statement)' published in a Festschrift presented to him on his seventy-fifth birthday, he speaks of being baffled when faced with the enormity of India and the enormity of the responsibility of being an 'Indian author' if that implied that somehow, someway, he must attempt to speak for the whole of that multilingual, socially diverse, and (in many cases to him) unknown country. Being a writer in India, he says, has made him constantly aware of 'the other'. Having lived in Delhi, next door to a south Indian Christian, for example, with whom he shared hours of conversation in English,

their one common language, Das notes somewhat wistfully that his neighbour remained frustratingly 'other' to him. From language to religion to the smells of cooking, his closest neighbour belonged to a world that was alien to his own. While Western writers have often spoken of the anomie of the city dweller, the Indian urbanite is isolated from his neighbours in far more basic terms. Das speaks eloquently of his sense of inadequacy as a writer when faced with the overwhelming complexity and diversity of Indian society; if his urban neighbour is hopelessly 'other', the village farmer of Orissa is no less so. He suggests that his predilection for the short story is only one reaction to the size and elusiveness of India as a whole. 'Sometimes,' he says, 'I wonder whether my preference for the microcosmic canvas of a short story or the quintessential statement of a poem is because I have not been able to relate properly to my country, whether I have been content with nibblings because her personality is beyond me.' Das also speaks of a sense of anguish that goes beyond any simple sense of inadequacy, of a pain of 'laceration' at being torn from the elusive whole that is India. But, he adds, a sense of inadequacy can also be a stimulant. If cultural diversity makes him feel inadequate, it also impels him to pursue an in-depth understanding of his subjects.

Faced with so many 'others', Das's choice has been to write about what he feels is least 'other' in the perplexing multifariousness of India; he writes about his own class, but even there he says he is not free from the plague of otherness, for he also feels alienated from his own social class, whose hypocrisies and foolishness he exposes in some of his stories. But beyond his inadequacy and alienation, he seeks an empathy that bridges the gap between himself and the others he writes about. Perhaps it is his complex relationship with his fictional subjects that helps us as readers to enter Das's fictional world; reader and author ultimately share both puzzlement and that sense of familiarity that is born of empathy.

In another essay, 'My Writing, My Times', Das speaks about another aspect of his fiction that will be immediately apparent to the reader of

the stories translated here. This is the disparity they expose between appearance and reality, particularly in the realm of human emotions. The characters in some of the stories speak to each other in one language, while we are privy to inner monologues that tell a very different tale. Human relationships are riddled with deceptions—self-deceptions and mutual deceptions; even a relationship with God shares the same tense ambiguities that mark human relationships. In searching for an explanation for his preoccupation with gaps between reality and appearance, in this essay, Das describes the external events of his life that may have conditioned his thinking. He tells us that he began writing in the late 1930s, sharing the exuberant hopes of the struggle for Indian independence. His romanticism was, however, short-lived. Perhaps, he says, the realities of the Great Famine in Bengal played a role in his early disillusionment. As an eighteen-year-old student returning from Patna to Orissa, he saw the corpses of the famine victims littering the rail tracks; when he wrote his first story at the age of twenty, it was about callous indifference to the suffering of the poor.

But it was his career as a government official that awakened him to the different levels of discourse in social situations and the often incompatible views of reality that actors in any social situation may have. In 1947, when India gained independence, Das assumed his first government position as deputy magistrate and collector in Puri. He soon learned that 'officialese' was a language all its own, often having very little to do with the reality he perceived. He also learned quickly that the promise of independence, marred by the bloodshed of Partition, would be further marred by corruption. Such, he tells us, were the formative influences on his writing: practical encounters with reality rather than lessons learned from other writers. At the same time, he stresses that he writes from his imagination; it is the sum total of lived experience that is the raw material of his stories, and not any single event to which he was a witness, as he tells us in another essay, 'The Inside Story: An Introduction' (originally published in *Indian Literature* in 1986).

Das began to write in earnest when he was thirty. He wrote mostly short stories, 'focusing on the strangeness of things, in terms of the divide between appearance and reality, in all kinds of personal, interpersonal and social situations'. But, like his sense of alienation, his exposé of these divides does not stop there. If empathy holds out the promise of filling the yawning gap between individuals, the search for transcendence in human life holds out the promise of bridging the gap between appearance and reality in human interactions. As Das tells us in 'My Writing, My Times', 'Merciless as I have been in exposing the inner man who is oblivious of or ignores the "divides" which would have troubled him if he were a sensitive person capable of some intellection, I have also tried my best to note his urges, often unclear and inarticulate, towards a higher life.'

These are by no means simple stories. They are, as Das tells us, about 'divides', about gaps between realities and imagination. In complex shifts between direct dialogue, interior monologue, and what I can only call interior or imagined dialogue, Das lovingly but mercilessly exposes his characters' thoughts, their self-deceptions, and the games they play with each other. These are stories about human weaknesses, the fallibility of human relationships, and the strategies we adopt to cope with our failures. They are also about coming to terms with unpleasant, sometimes shocking truths about others and ourselves.

In addition, all the characters in these stories struggle valiantly to establish for themselves some sense of individuality within the context of a complex nexus of social relationships. Often the struggle is marked by emotional violence, a pervasive sense of guilt, and tortuous denials of less acceptable feelings and motives. The mother and daughter in 'The Idol', the old men in 'Mr Absent-Minded, His Wife, and Co.' and 'The Journey', the patron of 'The Alleyway Cinema', the rejected lover in 'The Jasmine Bud and the Servant Girl', each in his or her own way struggles to establish a personal identity that is somehow protected against incursions from the outside world and the demands of children, partners in love and marriage, and fathers

and mothers. The stories agree that they do so at their peril; there is a cost to oneself and to others. The stories also explore a range of human emotions and motivations in all their conflicting untidiness. 'Compassion' pleads with us in the narrator's voice to use our own compassion in interpreting some of these motives. Some of the stories juxtapose different lifestyles and in so doing ask us to question the very foundations of our own choices. 'The Lullaby' sets a father, who has found meaning in the stillness of a flower in his garden, against a son, who seems addicted to an excess of action; 'When God Is King' asks us to see the educated lawyer with his intellectualizing and his sense of superiority side by side with the simple tailor and his unwavering faith in a God who could rob him of what he loves most dearly. Each illuminates the other, a partial truth, a part of some whole that remains undescribed, the relationship among its competing elements left unresolved. There are, in fact, few neat resolutions in these stories and no simple answers.

None of these stories has an 'ending', if by that we mean something that ties up all the loose ends and leaves the reader feeling satisfied that the author has taken care of everything. Das has often said that fiction cannot solve life's problems; it can only depict them. In his Introduction to *Beyond the Roots*, a collection of translations of Oriya short stories, Das cites André Gide's contention that the colour of truth is closer to grey than to black and white; our minds house contradictory desires and thoughts that are impossible to reduce to simple alternatives. Das's recent fiction embraces this dictum unhesitatingly. The truths of these stories are grey; our ambivalence about their characters is a response to their complexity and the sometimes brutal honesty with which they reveal themselves to us. These stories challenge us to look beyond the surface patterns of action, which may seem to be tending towards some conclusion, some solution, into the tumult of the often conflicting desires and thoughts in a person's mind. No matter how the story ends, we know that the middle-class housewife in 'Atonement' cannot throw away

her past with the simple act of giving back the amulet; it is just as unlikely that the rejected middle-aged lover in 'The Jasmine Bud and the Servant Girl' will find his sacrificial lamb ready to take on the burden of his sins; indeed, perhaps he has only added to his burden of guilt. And where does 'The Journey' really lead? Perhaps Das's most penetrating exposés are of the relationships of children with their parents and parents with their children. It is the special gift of his stories that we cannot really side with either in this eternal conflict; we know too much by the time we have finished the stories to be satisfied with monolithic answers. The power of the stories translated here lies not in any answers they give us but rather in their questions, which they may even seem to pose differently each time we read them.

In K.C. Das's comments on the state of Oriya fiction in *Beyond the Roots* and his remarks on his own stories published in his collected works, we are as likely to encounter the names of Gide and Dostoevsky as we are of Indian authors like Tagore. When I asked him about the writers who have most influenced his work, Das named several. He began with Gopinath Mohanty, whom, he said, he admires for his expansion of the potential of the Oriya language and his sensuous imagery. From Somerset Maugham, he said, he learned how effective simple and lively dialogue can be in a story; reading Maugham also developed his penchant for irony. But the writer he mentions most often when he writes about writing is Dostoevsky, whose insight into the spiritual anguish of the artist he continues to find deeply moving.

Das's literary world transcends national boundaries. Indeed, the rejected lover in 'The Jasmine Bud and the Servant Girl' chides the daughter of his former mistress for her lack of literary sophistication: hasn't she, he asks, ever read the Bengali author Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, the Oriya author Gopinath Mohanty, or Thomas Hardy? The three make equal claim on the attention of this young college student in Delhi. A remark like this is a strong reminder to us that there is little point in bracketing Indian authors and by extension trying to situate the fiction of K.C. Das purely within an Indian context.

While a character like Damu, the tailor in 'When God Is King', may seem impossible outside the setting of India or the old man's vision at the temple in 'The Journey' may appear uniquely Indian, the larger issues that the stories raise are universal. Like the thoughts of the characters in them, these stories resist being put into a rigid classificatory scheme. If in them we hear the voice of Gide with his grey truth, we also sense the tantalizing promise of some larger Truth that is capable of encompassing all the small conflicting truths. This Truth seems more like that of ancient philosophical systems than our modern truths. These stories, then, are many things at once. That is their richness and their challenge. And the hope behind these translations is that one day it will not only be a college student in Delhi who can claim as her literary heritage these stories, and others, written in Oriya, Bengali, and English.

I would like to thank Mr Shrigopal Mohanty, professor of mathematics at McMaster University, and his wife Shanti, my first Oriya teachers. I met K.C. Das for the first time when he was a guest in their home.

PHYLLIS GRANOFF

ATONEMENT

It was early morning. Sleep lingered yet in her eyes, while the steam rose from her untouched teacup. The bell rang. Her children were no doubt still in bed; Mrs Reva Mohanty had no choice but to go and open the door herself. The steam rising from her teacup touched the gentle spring breeze and seemed all the more inviting.

You could clearly see the marks of last night's sleep on her body, the lines under her blouse and at her waist (the blouse was a little tight, and the loose bed sheet must also have left its imprint). Mrs Mohanty was just over forty.

The guest showed no signs of embarrassment when he saw Mrs Mohanty's sleepy face. He touched her feet in respectful greeting as a broad smile spread over his dark face.

'It's me. Don't you recognize me?'

His face was dark, but that wasn't the only thing about him she noticed. He had a small moustache and was wearing tight green pants and a garish orange shirt. There was a handkerchief tied at his wrist. His left eye was twitching.

A twitching left eye, a belly that seemed unnaturally swollen and a voice more like a wail. But what she had always noticed was the left eye that kept twitching, as if it wanted both to announce to the world the child's miserable state and lay the blame for it on all and sundry. 'Tell me, why did you bring me into this world? If you don't tell me, I won't drink my milk.'

Beneath the thin moustache and the young man's crude physical presence she recognized a child she had once known and disliked. Suddenly she was face to face with memories going back twenty years. Without thinking, Reva Mohanty stepped back. Then she took hold of herself. She told herself that this sudden sinking feeling was nothing,

really nothing at all. It was as if she were living in a jet plane, carefully insulated from the outside world, when suddenly it plunged from thirteen to ten thousand feet. But there was no reason why the atmosphere inside the plane should be affected. No one would ever dream of breaking the thick glass windowpane and touching the edges of the swirling black clouds. This young man had come. It brought back memories of Mandi mawsi, that was all. Anyway, her tea was getting cold.

Reva Mohanty opened her mouth. Her open lips and wide-open eyes let her guest know that she recognized him. Oh yes, she certainly recognized him, and she was surprised to see him but pleased nonetheless. Yes, yes, she recognized him. She sat for some time in silence before she said, 'Oh, it's you .... What a surprise!'

The guest kept his lips tightly pursed in an effort to display some semblance of a broad smile. 'It's me. I've come to see you. Take a good look at me.'

Reva Mohanty quickly sized him up. Mandi mawsi's son was always naughty, but this young man looked positively good for nothing. I heard that he had quit school. I heard that he had been going from door to door, looking for work; he can't seem to keep a job for more than a month. He fights with everyone and then quits. Someone told me he had married a poor girl and had two children. Yes, I've kept track of him. It must be ages since I last saw him, but I figured he would look just like this. He looks so common with that little moustache and those tight pants.... He can't fool me. He won't charm me and flatter me and make off with money from me. Mawsi once told me, 'Reva, give him a good slap. It's not like he's never had one before. That's what he deserves, he's such a useless child. He thinks I'm too weak to do anything. He thinks I won't say a word. It's true. I can't bring myself to hit him. But he doesn't have to act so high and mighty in front of me.'

Reva Mohanty invited him into the dining room for a cup of tea (I won't be rude to Mandi mawsi's son). She even suggested that he

might want to freshen up in the bathroom. It was easier that way, easier than saying words she couldn't bring herself to say.

Mandi mawsi's son Braja, also known as Babua, didn't say a word either but went about his business of freshening up.

Reva's two daughters, Jayanti and Vaijayanti, were surprised to see the young man marching confidently around their house; to them, with his cheap and vulgar outfit, he seemed a creature of an entirely different universe. To their question, 'Who's that?' their mother responded with stony silence. 'You don't need to know. Just keep quiet and go about your business.' The two girls were clever enough to know that this unusual guest was somehow related to them. He wasn't the only peculiar visitor they had seen. There had been others; Mother and Father seemed to them to have crawled out of some dark cave, and there were others, from the same dark cave or jungle or village or whatever it was, who would show up at their doorstep. They were all somehow related to them, distant uncles or cousins, aunties and such. All that was required of the girls was to say hello politely and then disappear. Well, then, was this young man also a relative? What was wrong with saying hello to him, too?

Funny, but it was hard to describe exactly what he looked like. There was nothing particularly distinctive about his face; he looked like hundreds of other useless young men, dark-skinned with small moustaches, who wandered about town. He had come to their house for some reason or the other; once he stepped across the threshold back into the streets, he would disappear into the crowd. No one would be able to pick him out any more.

But Reva Mohanty wasn't looking at his face; she didn't want to look at him at all. Mandi mawsi's son. Just being confronted with him again—wasn't that enough of a shock?

A shock. As she continued to act the polite hostess, the glass windows of her jet plane slowly began to dissolve. She had made herself a second cup of tea; it wasn't particularly hot, but she suddenly began to feel as if the ordinary mid-morning sun rising in the sky would

reduce her to ashes with its fierce heat. It was as if some unexpected outside force was scorching her and she lacked the strength to fight back. She hadn't even had time to prepare herself for his visit; who's prepared when friends bring with them some VIP with an annoyingly raucous laugh; who's prepared for the sight of an amorous husband on a moonlit night, as appealing as some naked Jain monk? Does the cat give warning when it suddenly turns into a tiger and bites your finger? Now here was Mandi mawsi's son, appearing out of nowhere like a ghost to haunt the coveted morning of the company manager's wife and her two charming daughters.

It was Mandi mawsi's ghost, not her son. She had no son. She'd had no one at all.

Mandi mawsi loved me; she really loved me. No. No. That's not true. It wasn't me she loved; she loved my eldest daughter. She loved my firstborn daughter.

Why is he sitting in silence like that? He answers the questions I ask, but otherwise he just sits there munching his bread; he glances at me when he thinks I'm not looking, as if to see if I really am the person Mandi mawsi told him about. What could she have told you, anyway; you were just an ugly, dirty child with a swollen belly, some stray she had picked up somewhere, always whining, always up to no good.

Why should I be getting angry? Reva Mohanty checked herself. There's no reason for me to be mad and even less reason for me to feel afraid. So what if he tells me half-lies and half-truths, making me think about his dead mother, to try and get some money out of me. Let him ask me for money, so what? I'll give him what he asks for. I won't be stingy. But ... but, why won't he talk to me?

I've seen him a few times since Mandi mawsi died, but he was never this big and never quite this repulsive. Then I just thought of him as a past that I had long left behind me. Now he's come, like the nightwatchman, to guard over that past, thrusting his stick firmly in the ground as if to warn me: Watch out! Time will pass and I will still

be here, uglier than ever, more repulsive than ever. You can't just tear the past into little pieces and throw it away. It stretches itself out, longer and longer.

Reva Mohanty blamed her husband Sudhir. He could run away on the pretext of some business trip. If he were home, Mandi mawsi's Babua wouldn't have dared to behave this way. He would have said what he had come to say, asked for whatever it was he had come to ask for. But Sudhir is always running off and leaving me alone. He wasn't home on that fateful day, either. Mandi mawsi was there. From the windows of the dark hut you could see the ghostly shapes of tree trunks. Water kept dripping from them, drip, drip, without a stop. If water drips from a tree, does that mean the tree is crying? No, no, no one was crying that day. Only Mandi mawsi, who had dozed off leaning on the post of my sick child's bed; from time to time you could hear her whimper.

Reva Mohanty spoke just a little louder. 'Babua, you have two children, don't you?'

This was the answer: 'I had three children. One died just two months ago.' There wasn't really anything she could say. He'd had the final word.

Reva Mohanty let some time pass before she asked him something else. 'Have you come looking for work?'

'Oh, no. I have work. I'll be going back today.'

Reva Mohanty was beginning to feel disgusted. She got up. What was the use of trying to make conversation with such a rude, uneducated boor? Whatever he had come for was fine with her. She couldn't care less. She went to the kitchen and then to the garden. When she came back to the house, she asked her daughters all sorts of questions that she didn't usually ask; suddenly she needed to know whether they had school or college today and when they would be coming home.

Jayanti realized that her mother was agitated about something. She thought for a minute and then said, 'You rest today. I don't have to

go to college today. I don't have classes. I'll go and talk with that man. I'll find out what he wants.'

Reva Mohanty was startled. 'Are you crazy? Go. You go to college. You don't even know who he is. He's our Mandi mawsi's son.'

Jayanti couldn't remember ever having heard Mandi mawsi's name before. She was not entirely reassured, but she didn't know what else to do except obey her mother and go to college. Not long after that, her younger sister, Vaijayanti, made a noisy exit and got on the school bus with her friends.

Reva Mohanty was alone. Looking for something to do, she began to close all the windows in the house. She pulled the curtains over the open jalousied windows. That was her way of trying to keep the March sun from coming in—stay there, she was saying.

Even though she had some time to herself now, Reva Mohanty didn't go to take a bath. That was her way of trying to keep the peaceful cool of the water away from her—stay there, she was saying.

She was like some goddess in heaven whose time had come. No longer able to stop her fall, she would show everyone just how well she could plunge. Look at me, she would say, see how I can fall. I won't burn up when I hit the ground, I'll just keep falling, gently falling, further and further, down, down. I'll touch the life of death that I had forgotten, that I had erased, and then I'll rise again. Nothing will happen to me. I don't need anyone's help, not my husband's, nor my daughters', I don't need anything at all, not heat, not water .... Not one of them was there for me that day when deep in my veins a mother's blood pulsed ... not like blood at all, like poison. No, no one was there for me then. On that day there was just me and Mandi mawsi ...

Reva Mohanty forgot about Babua's existence. She went to her bedroom, stretched out on her bed and called her memories to come to her. Babua peeked in at her door a few times. Seeing her lying there, he hesitated, wondering if he should say something. She never even acknowledged his presence.

She was back in that hut, where she had been so happy twenty years ago. She had just arrived as a new bride, and she treasured the odours of the earth and cow dung, the smells of the bodies in such close quarters, as if they were all the fragrance of first love. She thought to herself, 'This is my life, my family, my world, from now on, forever. It will yield flowers and fruit. This is my little temple. Soon (the astrologer predicted that it would not take a year) a little god will raise his head, crying, wah, wah.' Her father had got her married into this remote and backward village, sure that he had found her a worthy husband. But Sudhir never found anyone there who appreciated his good qualities, and he grew restless. He went from the village to the city, from the city to Calcutta and Bombay and everywhere. But it wasn't so bad, really; when he was home he didn't care about anything else. All he wanted to know about was Reva. He didn't care if it was day or night, he had to have Reva. His unbridled lust for his wife made his old mother and young sister blush with embarrassment. It would take Sudhir some time to find a job, but it wouldn't be long before the cries of an infant were heard.

It was Mandi mawsi who first noticed that she was pregnant. 'Reva, did I hear something ...? I was wondering .... '

Why? Why? Why did it have to be her? Couldn't someone else have noticed? My mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, some neighbour, some other aunt. Anyone else. Weren't they also mothers? Didn't they have eyes?

Reva Mohanty bit her lips in anger. How many times did I ask God this and beg him for some answer? Mandi mawsi was the first to see the sparrow with the broken leg and nurse it; she was the first to find the blind dog and take care of it. She was the one who found the orphaned Babua and gave him her love. She took him in as her own son. But what would have been so awful if she hadn't been the first one to notice the existence of my daughter? Would the flow of her compassion have dried up?

Mandi mawsi was some distant relative of my husband's family. I had no idea how long she had been living with them. I didn't pay

much attention to the stories they told about her, how once she had had her own home but her husband had either gone mad and died or had simply died of cholera. In any case, he had punished her for her ugliness; he had taken her youth and given her pain before being himself consumed by his own torments in a kind of living death. I had made my own place in this backward world with the mud and earth, my mother-in-law and Mandi mawsi, and my other relatives and friends. My world was my husband, my happiness, my child, my future. And it was all perfect.

Why did she have to come out of nowhere, insisting, 'Here I am. Here I am'? Why did she have to love me and my daughter? Why didn't I know what would happen?

If I had known, I would have run away. I wouldn't have cared what anyone said. I would have just run far, far away, where there was no Mandi mawsi. And if I couldn't do that, I would not have let my daughter come into existence.

When she was born, Mandi mawsi was the happiest of everyone. Her face was like a round, flat frying pan, but her broad nose shook with delight and her spotless white teeth (she had given up eating betel after her husband died, in acknowledgement of her widowed state) sparkled with a joy that she had never felt before and would never feel again. She was beside herself with joy. When I saw how much she loved my daughter, I was won over.

It hadn't been very long ago that I had seen her with the dog. The dog was a stray. Our servant, Rathia, had given the dog a good swift kick. Mandi mawsi found it and stuffed a bone in its mouth. I saw the expression on her face. I won't deny that I could read on her face the marks that sorrow after sorrow had left there. Maybe it just wasn't in me to see the bloom of compassion on that broad face, which had been left so scarred by unhappiness. But I will tell the truth. What I could see on her face was a sudden feeling of victory, that flash of possession: 'I won. It's mine.' It was like the expression you see on a child's face when it gets a new doll whose lifeless existence is even lower on the scale of things than the child's own.

But why didn't I know? Why didn't I know when I saw how she danced with joy at the birth of my first child?

My new daughter laughed.

In my innocent pride, I said to her father, 'I wanted a daughter and God gave me a daughter. Look how she laughs. Not like you. Like me.'

One day she stopped laughing. She wouldn't laugh; she wouldn't cry. She just stared into space. It was as if she was blaming me for something, telling me, 'Why should I laugh? Why should I cry? You don't intend to let me live. You're going to kill me.'

Nonsense. Rubbish. The way she looked at Mandi mawsi didn't change. It was as if she was trying to see how deep Mandi mawsi's love for her was, love that was absolute and unwavering. I remember that she would cry with me; I remember it clearly. In the middle of the night, she would lie against my chest and cry. I would rub her body, give her assurances that she would live.

It didn't take a month. She no longer even looked like my daughter. Her face was puffed up like a ball and all red. Her nose was sunken in, and her lips were swollen and hung down. She looked more like Mandi mawsi; now she looked like Mandi mawsi's daughter, not mine.

She didn't look like my daughter. She didn't look like my daughter at all.

I did everything I could for her. I banged my head against the wall and begged God to let her live. But nothing worked. God didn't listen to me. And my daughter didn't understand or hear me; she just kept getting uglier and uglier, more and more deformed.

My husband stayed away. He made all sorts of excuses, how he had to see someone about a job or meet someone for something or the other. When he did come home, he would take one look at our daughter and then stare at me. As if he was waiting for me to give him some answer. As if I could explain to him how his young manhood had gone wrong, how all the gold he had saved had been squandered and had gone to waste.

Months passed. My daughter only became worse. Her vacant eyes looked like the eyes of a pig. Her hands and feet became as flaccid as her swollen face; she could no longer move them. The doctors (a famous doctor even came from the city; when he saw her it was as if he had found some precious jewel. He could hardly contain his pleasure) told us that this strange disease would just go on. My daughter would not die, but she would lie there forever in that bed. She would never talk, but she would urinate and defecate. She would never laugh, but she would open her mouth. And they warned me that in her condition it could be very dangerous if she contracted any disease that gave her a fever. Therefore, I was not to make light of any fever. No one could foresee the consequences if it was left untreated.

I followed the doctors' advice and was scrupulous about giving her her medicine. I also was vigilant in my prayers to God. Mandi mawsi reminded me of my duties morning and night. One day I didn't have time to throw myself before the tulsi plant in abject supplication; I just lit a lamp and prayed silently. Who knows where she had been hiding; Mandi mawsi came running to me to wipe away my sins. She stroked my head and said, 'My treasure. You forgot God. God will hear your prayer. I have surely sinned, but sin has never touched you.'

That was the first time I wanted to cut myself loose from her affection, which was like a noose around my neck. I began to rebel. Who are you to my daughter? Do you think you love my daughter more than I do? Do you think you want her to live, more than I do? To go on living like this?

My widowed mother-in-law and my sister-in-law, even my neighbours, who all wished me well, were taken in by her show of affection. My mother-in-law told me, 'Do whatever Mandi says. God gave her much suffering. She will understand how deeply you suffer now.'

I don't even know how many times Mandi mawsi gave me holy water to drink. She ran after every holy man she could and passed on to me the mantras they taught her. She gave me iron and tin amulets

to wear. In the end, in the middle of one night she woke me from sleep. She took a heavy gold amulet, placed it on my daughter's head, and then tied it to my hand. She said to me, 'This is the only thing of value that I have. It was a gift of the goddess Ambika. You must take good care of it. Don't lose it. Don't ever give it to anyone else.' When she had finished speaking, she uttered a sound of such contentment (I'm not sure whether she licked her lips or smacked them with a kissing sound) that my anger turned to disgust. I couldn't have said then what the difference was between Mandi mawsi and my daughter and whether it mattered to me if either one of them lived or died.

The next thing I remember is that night of light and shadow in August. The inner quarters of the house were totally silent. My daughter was sleeping. The others were either sitting around or sleeping; everyone was waiting. I knew that they were all waiting to see when she would breathe her last. When it would be all over. Mandi mawsi was leaning on the bedpost and had dozed off. I could hear her whimpering in her sleep. She wasn't just waiting. She was counting the minutes.

I am sure of it. She killed my daughter.

Believe me. I know I didn't forget to give her the medicine. Whenever her body felt the slightest bit warm I would call the doctors. I would listen greedily to their words of comfort and reassurance. I would tie the new packet of medicine to my sari and knot it firmly.

But ... none of them asked me. Not my husband, my mother-in-law, nor my sister-in-law. Mandi mawsi was watching over me. She kept me awake. She kept giving me water to drink from the amulet. Again and again I heard her say, 'She'll live. She'll live. Your daughter, your sorrow, will live for countless days and countless nights. Like a worm-eaten fruit, she'll go on dangling before your eyes. Yes, let her go on dangling night after night, day after day.'

I cried out, 'No, no, no. I don't want this gift. I never asked for it. I never asked to suffer, to be a victim, to be a Mandi mawsi. I can't

stand it. I'll rip open this dank darkness and run away. I'll laugh with my husband, I'll make us a life together ....'

I forgot to give her the medicine. When she began to have trouble breathing, Mandi mawsi took charge. I just let her. I knew that what was meant to happen would happen. Mandi mawsi would lose.

The last day, an afternoon in August, there was no one else in my room. My husband was not there. No friend of mine was there, no, no one else was there. Only I was there, and my daughter and Mandi mawsi.

That last day I could have cried for her. I wanted to bathe myself in tears as I had never done and would never do again and wash away all my stains, all my sins. Whatever the doctors might say, I could have brought my daughter back. Doesn't a mother have that power? But I didn't cry. I didn't do anything at all. Mandi mawsi wouldn't leave me alone.

After my daughter died, Mandi mawsi cried and wailed so loudly that anyone who heard her would have thought that she was the one who had killed my daughter. No one who saw her would have blamed me, would ever have said that I had ... with my own hand, my own daughter, my firstborn...

Reva Mohanty freed herself from the claws of memory. She looked tired but radiant. I've touched the limit. Now I will tell everything, from start to finish. I won't hide anything. Let my husband listen to what I have to say. Let my children hear me. Let God listen, I don't care any more.

But when she opened her eyes, she saw that no one in her immediate family was there. There was only Babua.

Reva Mohanty watched. Slowly Babua came closer and closer.

Why had Babua come ... why ... what had I ever done to him? Reva Mohanty sat up. In an effort to protect herself she clutched the bedpost. But she didn't dare ask Babua anything.

By now Babua was near. He was standing at the side of her bed. In his own agitation, he let flow an uncontrolled torrent of words.

'My mother entrusted me to you. My mother loved you very much. My mother told me that if I was ever in need, if I was ever in trouble, you would understand. You would save me from all harm. You remember?'

'I remember.' (Lies. It's all lies. After my daughter died, I ran away. I never heard anyone say anything to me.)

'I've never asked you for anything. I've always stood on my own two feet.'

'I know.' (Yes, I do know. I know exactly what's on your mind. Tell me how much. One hundred? Two hundred?)

'But today I've come to ask you for something. Don't get me wrong.'

'Fine.'

'Before my mother died she told me that you had a gold amulet that belonged to her. She said she had given you the last thing she had of any value.'

'A golden amulet? What golden amulet?' (Look at you, will you? You dare to ask me for something your mother gave me. What's it to you? I suppose you'll pawn it and use the money to live on.)

Babua kept staring at Reva Mohanty. It was as if his young mind could not quite take in the more experienced adult's lie.

Reva Mohanty now looked right into Babua's eyes. It was as if she wanted to burn his boldness to ashes with her own angry, hostile glance. What does he think I am? Am I some ordinary village girl that he can threaten me? That he can steal from me what's rightfully mine? If he had asked for money, I would have given him as much he wanted.

Reva Mohanty suddenly felt the welcome presence of someone who had come to her in need. Her mother-in-law liked to give alms to a certain dark-skinned Brahman on Saturdays. For the price of food for his stomach, he was willing to take away from her the curse of the evil planet Saturn. He would have to digest it himself. If he couldn't digest it, well, he would die. To the giver it was all the same. The giver was rid of the stain of Saturn. This dark-skinned young man, this dark

youth, had come to ask for Mandi mawsi's last possession; he had come to take away her gold amulet. How lucky. Let him have it. He will give me his blessing in exchange and take this evil eye of the planet Saturn with him. I have no need for it. Now my life is truly golden. What for do I need that fool's gold from the past? Let it turn to ashes!

'Oh, now I remember.' With these words, Reva Mohanty got out of bed and looked for the keys to her jewellery box. Babua got his wish. When he left, just before evening, he had the gold amulet in his hand.

At the dinner table that night, Jayanti asked, 'Mother, who was Mandi mawsi?'

In a calm, soft voice, slowly and deliberately, Reva Mohanty explained, 'It was long ago. You were not even born ... I had a mawsi named Mandi. She loved me very much.'

The Jasmine Bud and the Servant Girl

I had been staying in her house for three or four days when I started thinking again about the encounter I once had with my hostess. It had happened so long ago and I felt so embarrassed by it that I thought I'd been able to expunge it from my memory forever, but I guess I have to admit that wasn't the case at all. What set me off was my hostess (we'll call her Mallika, 'Jasmine') making snide remarks about the character of a young girl she had working for her. 'She's quite a piece of work, that one. No doubt, that's why her husband left her.' She smiled as she said these last words and let her voice taper to a whisper. As if she were the epitome of wifely chastity herself. And as if she had nothing better to do than find pleasure in the misery of someone beneath her.

I managed a smile in return, as if to show that I was suitably amused. And I shot her a glance that I thought was sufficiently full of meaning. I hoped that it would remind her of the past ever so slightly and let her know, 'Well, you weren't so bad yourself.' But the next minute I had to confess that there was probably no one on earth who cherished a more vain hope than I. After all, my hostess was named Mallika. She was always in full bloom, always expansive and happy. She would not let anything spoil the pleasure of today's idle chat by bringing up the past or a lover named Ghana! Now she was Mrs Mallika Manasinha, mother of an eighteen-year-old daughter. Her double chin was a sign of her prosperity, and if she hadn't dyed her hair I suspect that the grey would have peeped through not just at the sides but at the top as well. At that very moment, she was sitting on the opposite side of the table and preparing paan for a friend of her husband's, someone she considered an intimate family friend, almost like a brother. In the family of the gods, she would have been Aunt Kali, the Goddess Kali

in her domesticated incarnation, wise and married, untroubled about whatever there was in her appearance that was no longer so attractive. How could you be so silly as to think that you could ruffle her composure just by looking at her like that? My hostess went on preparing the paan. She made the gesture of brushing aside some curls that weren't even there; maybe she did it out of habit, or maybe she was wiping some sweat off her forehead, who knows.

It was midday. The windows in the dining room were wide open. The monsoon would soon begin, and the brazen sun shared the sky with a dark shadow, black as the surface of a well-seasoned skillet. It seemed as if at this liminal moment all things were possible, all you had to do was will them to come into being. If you really wanted it, you could make your angry demands or you could plead in abject desperation, and the sky would fill your plate; it would rain down its waters; it would howl with the laughter of its winds; it could cry if it had to, laugh if it had to. But I wasn't interested in looking at the sky. I was fixated on the wall behind my hostess. I kept telling myself that this was impossible, absolutely impossible. She wasn't the Goddess Kali, that woman sitting in front of me like some Mt Himalaya of black ice. And nothing I could ever do would move her. I could never remind her of her own truths and lies. There was nothing I could expect from the spectacle of the impending monsoon sky. Nothing I could do. I simply wasn't equal to the task. And that was that!

She was bigger than me, I had to admit it. I just had to admit it.

So what if she was my junior; she had the inner strength of one of the sages of old. Compared to her, I was like a babe in arms. Picture what would happen if I decided to expose her lies. If I somehow got the courage to go over to her, with the window wide open like that (or maybe I would slam it shut first), and plant a long kiss on those lips that were once so flirtatious. I would look into her eyes and ask, 'What's that you were saying about the servant girl? You were once quite something yourself, you know. Don't you remember that day, how you sent your husband out on some errand because you wanted

to make love with me? And how later while you talked to him on the phone you spoke to me with your body?' I know exactly what my hostess would say if I did that. First she would wipe the wet traces of my kiss from her lips. As if in that one instant she could get rid of whatever it was, the elixir of immortality or some vile poison. And then she would flash me one of her magnanimous smiles and say, 'Fine, fine. Thank you .... And don't you know, her husband's a decent sort, if a little on the simple side. He came here once. I couldn't help feeling that if I talked to him he'd agree. He'd be willing to take his wife back.'

I was lost in my own thoughts. When I came to, I realized that if my attack and my kiss were not directly perceptible to anyone but myself, such was not the case with the words that I had imagined she would say. We could all hear them distinctly, dancing from her carefully painted lips, 'And don't you know, her husband's a decent sort ...'

It wasn't exactly contempt I felt for her; the word *hate* seemed more appropriate to me then. After all, I had admitted that she was something larger than myself, and you can't really have contempt for something superior. But I could hate her. I could say to her, 'You are my sworn enemy. Not just mine, but the sworn enemy of even the slightest drop of decency and truth, without which human society would remain chaotic madness. No, that's not right either. It's nothing to me, after all, if your servant's husband takes her back. But somehow there has to be some trace of sadness, some hint of regret. It just can't be over like some grade-B Hindi movie. There has to be some acknowledgement of truth, some reckoning. Your husband treats you like a queen, he has made his head a throne for you to sit on, as the saying goes (I had to laugh at the thought of her fat black body sitting on his head, but it didn't make me hate her any less), but with all that, he still should know about what happened between you and me. Whatever he does with that knowledge. It's not a question of whether you sinned or just made a mistake, or whether even what you did was perfectly natural, something that happens all the time. He simply has to know about it. He has to know.

I am not sure what the best way to tell him would be. So many years have gone by; it seems like ages have passed. Your life is full, with children, material possessions. I'm really not sure what to do with that burning truth, how to package it. And that's why I hate you from the bottom of my heart.

I assumed that my hatred must have changed my appearance, but my hostess didn't seem to notice. Mallika seemed perfectly content as she kept on chattering. She moved on from the servant to talk of the weather in Delhi and her husband's obsessive truthfulness, which had made him insufferable to the people with whom he worked. As she kept on talking, all of her old habits surfaced. The curls she brushed aside might not be there any more, but the other objects of her compulsive gestures were. For example, whenever she paused she would leave her lips open just a touch (her lips were so full, so dark, I could hardly believe that once I had ...); and she had a way of lowering her eyelids and laughing softly. (No matter how wide she opened her dreamy liquid eyes, I could still see the guilt in them. Except for my wife's pure and sinless eyes, how could I have ever ...) As she talked, she had a way of letting out a childish giggle. (Trying to play the young girl, are you? Maybe it would sound charming if your daughter did it; let's see, if you are jasmine, she is the jasmine bud. Anyway, it doesn't become you at all.) She had so many bad habits; these were just a few, but who could be bothered to list them all?

Suddenly I heard the sound of a scooter stopping in front of the house; from the window, I could see a young girl get off the scooter. It didn't take me long to realize that it was the jasmine bud herself, more properly known as Lakshmi Manasinha; her mother had said that she had gone to stay with a friend in Chandigarh for a few days. She was back. But what I really noticed first was simply a young girl, unmarried, fresh. Free. I had the feeling that the leaves on the trees couldn't help themselves; they whistled at her when they caught sight of her honest-to-goodness curls and saw her scarf fluttering in the wind. Their rustling sound was all the answer they could give to her

loud and exuberant 'Hi!' Poor things. No doubt even leaves like to take a break now and then, and this change of seasons would have been an ideal time for their vacation, but the young girl's arrival had stirred them up. Even I felt affected by her sudden appearance, by her vitality and energy. I often felt that way when I saw a vibrant young thing like her; as if, caught in the spell of her boundless energy, I could rid myself of the exhaustion and apathy of advancing age. Young men of that age generally aroused jealousy in me and occasionally even fear; girls were another matter altogether. That was a sure sign that I was getting old. It didn't bother me in the least. Better this than becoming like that woman sitting in front of me!

The moment passed and with it the faint stirrings that the sight of the girl had aroused in me. She came running up to her mother and nuzzled against her; her mother hugged her affectionately. I got a good look at her face; it was full of acne scars. She was definitely her mother's daughter, even though her eyes weren't quite as round and soupy. They were more sharp and lively, more like her father's.

She didn't give me any time to pursue these musings. She was surprised and excited to see me. 'Uncle Ghana!' she exclaimed, and as she began to greet me more formally she added, 'There's something I want to talk to you about. I haven't seen you in ages.' There was nothing flirtatious in her remark; she seemed dead serious.

In fact, she seemed so serious that for a minute I thought she was going to cross-examine me. Tell me that I was the one responsible for her mother's moral lapse. I would have to explain myself, atone for everything. There's no trusting young people these days. Well, if that was what she wanted to say, let her say it. I would let her know that, yes, I had fallen into her mother's trap, but afterwards I had been consumed with remorse. I had even let my wife Vimala see some faint signs of that remorse. If she hadn't suddenly fallen ill and become so weak, if she hadn't passed away two years ago, I am sure I would have told her everything, absolutely everything. On the other hand, just look at your mother. Far from feeling remorse, she's thriving.

And with each year she seems to prosper more and more. In front of your father, she pretends to be a paragon of wifely virtue; just today I heard her cast aspersions on her poor servant's character. Your mother is ...

There really was no reason for me to suspect that the jasmine bud was privy to our secret. I had never even written a note to Mallika. It was not that I was a particularly cautious type; it was just that our relationship was totally based on sex, pure sex. There was no room in it for flowery confessions of love. Whispering sweet nothings at a critical moment didn't constitute love, and it certainly didn't need to leave a record of itself! But ... was it possible that her mother had told her about us? Mallika, could you .... Oh God! No, it was easier for me to believe that the sun would rise in the west and play leapfrog than that Mallika would be stung by a guilty conscience and in a moment of weakness say something to this fresh young bud of a child, never mind to a husband or older daughter. No, not in my wildest dreams ... it was impossible!

The possibility seemed so absurd to me that I burst out laughing. Naturally, neither the mother nor the daughter was there at the time. They were sitting on the bed in the bedroom prattling on about all sorts of nonsense. I could see through the open door how close they sat to each other; as they chatted away, they busied themselves with little womanly tasks. The mother helped the daughter take off her earrings, the daughter slipped a bracelet on her mother's wrist. Things like that. Did they think I don't know that Chandigarh is famous for a special type of bracelet? My only regret was that they couldn't hear me laughing. At least that might have made them realize that all this display of mother-daughter affection was a bit overdone. But what else could you expect from jasmine and her jasmine bud?

The next day the daughter put on another of her deadly serious expressions and came to talk to me again. By this time, I knew that it was just another affectation. Inherited from her mother. To show the world that being young didn't mean being entirely empty-headed or

without the ability to feel things deeply. After all, didn't their hearts beat in sympathy when they listened to their pop music?

Her dark face may have seemed in harmony with the evening hour, but the fact that her once lively eyes, trying to emulate the quiet sunset, were now fixed and unmoving made me uneasy.

I had the feeling that she was putting on a show for me and it was costing her some effort. In any case, she was quick to sit down right next to me. She looked around her and, as if reassured that no one else was there, let out a deep sigh and began what it was she had come to say.

'You know that piece you just wrote? Well, I want to know more about it.'

'Huh?' I am an engineer. I couldn't imagine what she could have seen that I had written and what she would have understood of it if she had!

She reminded me that about six months ago I had written a letter to the editor of the *Statesman*. The letter was published under the heading 'When Will This Waiting End?' She had read it and remembered it. I was flattered. That was one of two letters I had written in my life (the other, which I had written to our local newspaper when my son Umakant had failed his high-school exams, was intended to be a scathing indictment of the favouritism that prevailed on the school boards) which clearly revealed my social consciousness. No one could say that there was even a whiff of self-interest in this latest letter. What was the wife of my gardener to me? But it was her story that I had related. She was desperately ill and needed an operation, but every time she went to the government-run hospital she was turned away and told to come back later. Next time, they would assure her. But what good was that? She had sent her children back to the village, and they had mortgaged every inch of land they had. And after all that to be told 'no', to be told you have to wait? I poured out my anger in the last line. I wrote, 'Will the waiting of our poor ever end?' I don't know how successful my letter was, but for my gardener's wife, at

least, the waiting was over. One day the gardener came to me, bawling obscenely. 'It's over, sir. Nitia's mother is gone. She began to vomit and vomit. There was so much blood.' I didn't feel the need to write another letter to the editor.

I now gave a somewhat embellished account of the incident. What was that? Could that be pain I saw in Lakshmi Manasinha's eyes? I didn't think she was entirely hard-hearted, but how could I have suspected that she would melt like this! I began to feel that I should have written that follow-up letter after all!

No, she really was pained. There was much to say now that we were alone, but it was too late. It was dark by now, time to turn on the lights. In the light, I'd be able to see her as she really was: I'd see those acne scars on her face, the lips like her mother's, the lines of self-satisfaction on those lips ... the stillness in her eyes would be gone. But I didn't jump up to turn on the lights. I wondered to myself, how many more evenings like this would I have in my life, with all their magic allure, their seductive power. Let this go on a bit longer, what harm could that possibly do?

The girl moved a bit closer to me. Her voice was agitated now, full of emotion, as if to say: Now I've got you. I'll cast you into the rushing current. I'll drown you in the flood.

'Uncle Ghana! I've seen it with my own eyes. Right here in Delhi at the famous hospital where all the rich and famous go for treatment; there are scores of poor people waiting. Outside. On the street. Like beggars. Why are they waiting like that? They're afraid that if they go home they won't get back in time. The bed will be filled by someone else. I've seen them. I've talked to them.'

I listened in astonishment. She got up and turned on the lights. I lowered my head like some fervent nationalist suffering at the suffering of his fellow Indians. My fingers traced a pattern on the table in front of me.

'There was a man there. His name was Dhaniram. He had his wife, his daughter-in-law, and his grandson with him. The grandson

couldn't have been more than a year old; he was a cute little thing, fair-skinned, but he was covered with bright red spots. The old man said that the doctors had told him that the spots were nothing special, nothing to worry about; they had been caused by whatever it was that was making the child sick. The doctor told him to come back in a week; there was no bed free. When he came back, they told him, "There's a strike now. What can we do?" The old man told me, "Yesterday we went back again, and this time they told us we would have to wait a month. Munna's mother couldn't take it. She broke down in tears. Then some woman shouted at her, 'What are you carrying on like that for? Your child's not dead yet.'" Uncle Ghana, can you imagine such a thing?'

I had to laugh to myself. You can't teach an old parrot to talk; you can't teach an old dog new tricks. No doubt the child's mother had bawled uncontrollably, obscenely, like my gardener had to me. You couldn't expect everyone to be able to take it the way I could.

'The child was having trouble breathing. He was sick to begin with, and it was a hot day. The air felt like the air from a blast furnace. (I couldn't help wanting to ask, and you? What were you doing there? Trying to test yourself? Conducting a little experiment?) His mother kept making strange cooing sounds at him, and from time to time he would manage a smile. The shrivelled-up old grandmother would grin back at him, too. What was so strange, though, was that the old man never so much as smiled. There was nothing on his face, no smile, no pain, no anger.'

Why should there be? He was beyond that. He was inured to fate. A familiar character. Could have come from a novel by your Oriya author Gopinath Mohanty or the Bengali Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay or Thomas Hardy. Just because you are a science student, does that mean you've never read a piece of literature? Read a work of literature; you might learn something about human nature.

'I've seen so many people like him. Once, when it was freezing, a typical winter's day in Delhi (I hope you were properly bundled up.

Or was that also a little experiment you were conducting?), I saw a young woman. She must have been about my age. There was a man with her, maybe her husband, maybe not. I don't know why, but they thought I was a doctor and they started following me. She was wheezing and coughing so that I had trouble understanding what she was trying to say, but she kept begging me, "Take me to the hospital."'

Until now, I had refrained from looking directly at her. She was no longer Mallika's daughter to me. All that excess of emotion. I had seen so many like her in my life, so many young men and women, overflowing with feeling, choked up and tearful. False sentiment, all of it. Why should I bother looking at her? I might get caught up in it myself. But when she finally said that some patient took her for a doctor and started following her around, that gave me an idea. I could break the thread of her rambling. I could shut her up with just one word. Her father had already talked to me. I had the advantage.

With renewed spirit, I turned to her and said, 'Don't worry. You can become a doctor if you really want. One day you'll be able to fix all those sicknesses, take away all that pain and suffering yourself, won't you?'

I wasn't being sarcastic. At least not with her. If there was any sarcasm in my voice, it was directed at the eternal innocence of youth.

She didn't say a word in reply. She just glared at me in such a way that I felt I must have struck her a mortal blow! No, that wasn't quite it, either; such an act of violence implicates both aggressor and victim. What I read in that injured, innocent look was sheer astonishment, plain and simple, as if she wanted to say, 'Uncle Ghana, don't tell me, you too!' Fine, fine with me. What's Uncle Ghana to you, anyway? So what if he is one of your father's closest friends. That closeness got even closer when you were all in Calcutta. You must have been about a year old (that was when your mother and I ...). Never mind, that doesn't give me the right to hurt you. But, believe me, I wasn't trying to make fun of you. I meant it for your own good. I'm not your sworn enemy.

But she wasn't taken in by my unspoken assurances. Before she opened her mouth again, she stared at me, just a little longer, as if to

say, you are the hunter and I am the dove, your prey. She didn't give me time to decide whether her eyes were jet-black or subtly tinged with red, whether the light in them was deep and liquid, like the light in her mother's eyes, or sharp and restless like the light in her father's eyes. Or if hers was another sort of fire altogether. At long last, she lowered her gaze and the light that beamed from them appeared to have somewhat dimmed. It might be that encroaching old age was getting to me, though I would have vehemently denied any such thing, but whatever the reason I had the strangest sensation. I could have sworn that she felt sorry for me, the silly girl! As if I wasn't the hunter at all. No. I was more like the sage Valmiki, the legendary author of the Ramayana, out on a walk one day, admiring a lovely pair of cranes, when some hunter shoots one of them right in front of my eyes. Only, unlike Valmiki, who in the grip of pathos would go on to write one of the world's greatest poems, I wasn't capable of writing a line! She had seen right through me; she had seen me for what I was.

And she couldn't contain herself a minute longer.

'Uncle Ghana! Don't misunderstand me. I haven't the slightest intention of becoming a doctor or anything like that. Nurses, big doctors, small doctors—they're all the same. They're all in business—to them it's just one more way of making a living. They don't really care. I've seen the way they look at their patients. One man's sitting up in bed groaning; another can't speak any more and is trying to make himself understood by waving his hands, trying to say that his IV has run out or something; another shuffles past them, limping down the corridor, gesticulating wildly and talking like some madman. To the nurses and doctors it's all the same. They're all simply "patients", poor, underprivileged. They never really look at them; they never see them as individuals. I'll never be one of them. I refuse to be like that!'

Then what are you going to be like? What in the world are you going to be?

I was sure that she would not only grasp my question but also wouldn't deign to give me the pleasure of a reply. It was as if she just assumed that I couldn't possibly be so stupid. Why, of course she would find a place for herself, a role in which she could fully express herself, and one that she'd be good at, too. Maybe she would be a teacher, maybe a wife; maybe she would devote herself to social service; maybe she would even become a revolutionary. But, whatever it was to be, I should know. It was as if she wanted to say that, whether he liked it or not, Mr Ghanashyam Pradhana was not without some responsibility in the matter of Lakshmi Manasinha's career—what it would turn out to be and what would ensure its success.

She got up and left me there, and needless to say she left me speechless. I can't quite remember if a smile of sympathy played on my lips or if I just threw politeness to the winds and concentrated all my energy on trying not to betray the slightest trace of emotion for fear that she might think I was making fun of her.

In any case, the next few days passed without a problem. The impending monsoon seemed to be growing impatient. There was something about the air and the clouds that made the approaching coolness seem even closer. With the help of my friend Madhu, and, above all, through the good graces of those in power, I was about to complete the task that had brought me to Delhi in the first place. I worked for a major engineering firm in Calcutta; it was concerned that there might be a problem with a substantial government contract it sought to obtain. The people in Delhi were taking their time. I'd thought: as long as Madhu is in Delhi, why don't I go and see what I can do? Madhu works in a different ministry, but he has people he knows, everywhere. And there's something irrepressible about him; there are plenty of people who can't seem to resist his way of making you feel that he could squeeze water out of a stone. Don't forget, after all, that even Mallika had been dazzled by him. The rest was easy sailing. No, no. I didn't mean to excuse her in the least. I just wanted to say what an unusual person I think Madhu is.

The sign for me that everything was back on track was that Lakshmi Manasinha seemed perfectly normal. That evening must have been particularly hot or something. That would explain why her tendency towards emotional excess, so natural in the young, had been temporarily dampened. And, why now everything seemed to be business as usual. She and her mother were back to sharing their intimate moments of gossip and silliness. And she was engaged in serious and grown-up discussions with her father about whether the parliamentary system was the best system of government or whether one should have an elected president; she was calm and collected through it all, not in the least excited. As she listened to her favourite pop singer on the radio, she beat out the rhythm in accompaniment. Of course, I did catch a glimpse of her from time to time looking vacantly at the sky, as if she could read some secret message written there in tiny letters. But I didn't make much of it; didn't these highly educated types occasionally stare into space like that? Get lost in their own thoughts every once in a while? In any case, I was by now convinced that the suspicion I had earlier harboured about her was entirely groundless. I thought I would tell her that it was fine to have sympathy for the poor but one had to keep things in balance. Besides, at the rate at which they were multiplying, it didn't mater how many hospitals were set up, how many new beds were opened. If it was necessary, I would have to explain to her that the poor also make love and sometimes they even commit adultery. Like your servant. They lie, they fornicate, they scream, they curse at the doctors and the police and what have you. Luckily, I didn't have to give her such pain. The magnanimity of my letter to the newspaper editor would remain unblemished.

On the last evening of my stay in Delhi, all the natural charm and loveliness around me seemed about to overflow its banks. For one thing, the monsoon had begun. Earlier in the day, the clouds had opened up with a torrent of rain; in the afternoon, the rain had slowed to a steady drizzle. Once in a while, there was a clap of thunder that rattled

the glass windowpanes. It was as if the rainy season knew it had a long journey yet to make; it had better take its time, practise a little of this, try a little of that.

The Manasinhas were by nature quiet people. Along with the first rains of June came a cool trickle of assurance that all was as it should be. The dinner table. Dinner, then sleep, claiming a lover's due. (No matter what the weather, my friend Madhu could have his pleasure. Although the vision of him doing so floated before my eyes, I wasn't drowning in any flood of hatred. All was as it should be there too.) I had the copy of the contract in my pocket, thanks to my friend Madhu. I had to give him credit, though. He hadn't asked me a word about it; he clearly didn't want to make me feel that I had to humble myself in gratitude. It was as if he wanted to say, 'I'm not just a friend. Look on me as a brother.' He had bought a certain fish for dinner, thinking that I liked it. He was wrong, but that doesn't matter. It was my wife Vimala who liked it, not me. It smells too strong for me. Of course, Mallika knew that; in the past, we had had many an opportunity to get to know each other's likes and dislikes. But I had to applaud her cleverness; she didn't let Madhu know the mistake he had made. It wasn't just that she didn't want to spoil her husband's pleasure. It was her way of congratulating me on my self-control; the fish was bound to remind me of Vimala and that was bound to make me feel sad, but on an evening like this there was no room for sadness. And I didn't say a word that night that might have hurt Mallika. I was not about to give free rein to the feeling that this was my last night; tomorrow I would be going back to Calcutta, and who knows when I would get another chance to express my hatred. This hate seemed to me like my one treasure, a glittering jewel, a special asset that I was saving for the proper occasion. Why would I squander it?

It seems to me that Lakshmi, Mr and Mrs Manasinha's only child, was somehow a part of the charming scene on that last night. She must have been sitting across from me; I couldn't possibly not have noticed her. I had thought that she would steal a glance at me when

Madhu said that his Lakkhi (that was his nickname for her) was going to study medicine in Delhi or somewhere else. But she didn't. She didn't say a word. Wasn't that proof enough? I was reassured when Mallika started in with her snide remarks about her servant, and her daughter joined in the fun. Don't you know, it's the funniest thing. For the last few days, she has been coming to work, smiling. Mallika quickly corrected the mistake: she *had* been coming to work, smiling. No more. She had told me and all the women in the neighbourhood that her husband wanted her back. He had sent her new saris, bracelets, all sorts of gifts. But the days passed, and her husband was nowhere to be seen. And what was the truth? Well, the truth was that lightning may flash but the dark clouds remain. Well, do you think the poor girl was telling a lie, then? Heavens no. She was dreaming. Mallika stopped there and bowed her head. We all broke out laughing. I remember clearly that a smile danced on Lakshmi's lips.

I remember, too, that eventually we finished eating and had something to drink. The smoke from Madhu's pipe seemed to mingle with the smoke from my cigarette in that room, heavy with the mists of the monsoon. As if to say, we are all the same. The Manasinha family, the Pradhana family, the living Mallika, the dead Vimala, her daughter, our sons. Who could say that Madhu wouldn't find himself one day in another house; he was an outgoing, sociable type, after all. Who could say that the faithful Vimala didn't find herself another man to give her pleasure? Maybe even that Amar, who, with his fair skin and his big eyes and his idealism, seemed to be cast from the same mould as Vimala? What difference did it make? We are all inexorably linked; we are all tied together, we are all in the same boat, we are all the same. In any event, we are all perfectly normal. I am what I am and my friends are no different. We could easily swap places, you come to my house and I'll go to yours. Send one of us to your place and send one of yours to our place ...

I wasn't aware of the exact moment when Lakshmi got up from the dining table. I realized that she wasn't there any more when Madhu

suddenly, without warning, said, 'Ghanashyam, there's something I want to talk to you about. Feel free to say yes or no; I won't be offended. What I want to say is ... how would it be if our Lakkhi were to marry your Umakant?'

At first, I thought to myself, 'Oh, that's exactly what I meant. Send one of us to your place and one of yours to our place.' The drizzle was letting up. As he made his proposition, all hell should have broken loose; the heavens should have opened up with a torrent of rain. What a moment of climax. But Madhu was too prosaic to have appreciated the drama of it anyway.

I pulled myself together. It was over, that temporary aberration of excitement. It did stop drizzling. It seemed to me as if the climactic moment had returned only to fall flat on its face. Madhu was telling me that my son Umakant should marry his daughter Lakshmi. My son Umakant. Marry Mallika's daughter Lakshmi. The two of them would become one, with the sacred fire as witness, and forevermore would be one, in bed, in the eyes of society.

I suspect that I had never come to a fast decision in my entire life, not about anything in my office, not about anything in my family. But just this once I surely did. I didn't even ask for time to think. I didn't even bother to pretend to be pleased at the suggestion or to make excuses, to say that I had to ask my son or determine whether their horoscopes matched. I just blurted out, 'Madhu, I'm sorry, but that's impossible. Umakant has someone he wants to marry.'

It was a lie. If you can't lie to save yourself from the jaws of death, what value can truth possibly have? If nothing else, isn't this what our great epic, the Mahabḥarata, teaches us?

If you need to look for a reason behind my decision, you're free to do so. No one is stopping you. You might think that because she was Mallika's daughter she lacked whatever was required, that special something, to become my daughter-in-law. Or that I was afraid I would have to admit to myself, and others would also see, that my hatred was a thing of the past. That, in fact, what I had felt all along was love.

That's ridiculous. I am not given to fear. I know the extent of my hatred, and anyway there was no way that Mallika had passed her sin on to her daughter.

Or maybe you think that I'd seen a different side of Lakshmi and that had made me nervous. My studious son hoped to go places. So what if he had once failed his high-school exams; it had been smooth sailing after that. He was about to complete a degree in engineering. This girl could cause him trouble; she could muddy the waters ahead. One of them could destroy the other. That's equally ridiculous. Umakant is my son, and I consider Lakshmi like my own daughter. They're both special, both good, each ...

Would anyone believe me if I said that what I really wanted was that Lakshmi never marry? She hadn't come among us to savour the pleasures of the relationship of man to woman. That evening when we spoke together what I really saw in her glance, that last night what I really saw in her smile, was compassion. A compassion in which she could dissolve all of our sins—mine, her mother's, her father's. Nothing to do with the trivial vulgarity of love and sex but with the true sin of falsehood, of the failure to feel, to know and experience. Of the failure to be, of nothingness. God only knows what that would be like for her, but for certain she would have to suffer. Time and again, countless times, she would bleed, like Jesus. Not for her children, but for the sins of her fathers and mothers.

I won't ever admit that it is only servants who have dreams. We, too, have that right.

When God is King

Purushottama Pani was standing on the balcony of his house. You could find him there at this time of day practically every day. He had chosen just the right moment, when there would be quite an audience to see him. A little earlier, at dawn, there would be no one on the street but a few street sweepers and a couple of men from the neighbourhood, clutching their water pots, out to clean their teeth with some twigs in the old-fashioned style. Later, there would be a crush of clerks making their way to their offices and crowds of students and college kids fighting their way to school, none with any time to look up and admire the spectacle he presented to them. Like clockwork, then, at just the perfect moment, there he would be, all five feet of him, all spiffed up, in a freshly starched shirt and pressed pants. He would stand there for a few minutes before disappearing into his study. This was his way of telling the world that the barrister's workday had begun.

In those days, the neighbours who caught a glimpse of Mr Pani as they went about their own business couldn't help but be impressed. What impressed them was not the two-storeyed house and the imposing pots of imported flowers and ornamental trees, all carefully arranged in rows. This was the city, after all, and such houses with balconies were a familiar enough sight. No, what impressed them was being allowed to see the gentleman himself in all his glory like that, to see the gentleman whose complexion was as fair and glowing, whose appearance was as youthful and vigorous, as it had been on the very first day so long ago when they'd had the good fortune to set their eyes on him! There was not a single grey hair on that head, not a single hair that dared flutter across the boundary line made by the parting he had so meticulously combed. Everything about him, the way he dressed, was perfection itself, and had been for as long as they could

remember. His shirt and trousers were spanking clean and smoothly pressed. They didn't have to wait long to see him emerge from his house, wearing the outer coat of a lawyer of the state high court, and get into the car waiting for him. At the end of the day, he would put on his evening clothes and go out to his club or to some other appointment. There was no question that his evening garb stood out less. It was the way he looked so early in the morning that fascinated them; at an hour of the day when others took little care with what they wore and were still roaming about in their pyjamas and torn shirts, not even bothering to hide their unsightly spreading midriffs, there stood Mr Pani all decked up for the day, lording it over the mass of common people, day after day, every day. It was this sight that awed the spectators who were fortunate enough to see it. Whatever you might say about him, he was clearly one of a kind. It was as if his appearance was carefully contrived to match the importance of his office as a high court lawyer; indeed, if God worked from moulds, Mr Pani could easily have served as the mould for 'The Lawyer'.

Some said that he regularly dyed his hair, even the few strands that peeked out from the palms of his hands. And some said that those perfect teeth of his were false. And that he rubbed some kind of cream on his skin, some cream he had imported specially from England. But they all had to admit that if you couldn't call Mr Pani the 'perfect gentleman', the way you would have called some British gentleman back in the old days, you couldn't use the phrase for anyone any more. Surely, you wouldn't call his colleague Mukunda Mohanty, with his middle-aged spread, a gentleman? And surely not uncouth Yadu Mishra, who for all his speechifying and pretensions of being a great man still wore the traditional dhoti instead of trousers and, what's more, used the corner of it to wipe the red paan stains from his lips. And not one of those other shrivelled-up old men. Could you imagine anyone of them even sitting in the same row as Mr Pani at a public gathering? No, no. There might be men more worthy than he in other respects, but you would never call a single one of them a perfect gentleman.

But, if you thought about it, surely you could understand what a singular accomplishment this was for Mr Pani. I mean, you could imagine, couldn't you, how much work it was for him to preserve that fastidious appearance of perfect elegance? First of all, there were the practical things—there was the matter of the tailor and the washerman—and then he had to know all about cosmetics and to exercise regularly to keep fit. Second, and more importantly, there was the matter of his mental concentration. If he lost that single-mindedness even for a minute, how long would it take for cracks to appear in that carefully constructed edifice? How would he be able to hide the black bags under his eyes? The secret of his accomplishment, in fact, was that he studiously kept his distance from everything, either at home or outside, that might disturb his composure. Sometimes he even considered himself to be practising a form of what the sages of old had praised as the religious life, namely, total non-attachment. Even though he was a criminal lawyer (he had total contempt for the trivia of court cases dealing with disputes over land and property), even though he was forced to deal with criminals and other low-life types, he never allowed any of their dirtiness to rub off on him. Even if he lost the case and his client had to go to jail, he couldn't have cared less, just as long as he had been paid in full. He wasn't even particularly happy if he won a case, as long as his client paid him, even if he had to get the money by breaking-in somewhere else and stealing it! Now surely you can't think such non-attachment was easily acquired and maintained!

One of the biggest challenges was the commotion that took place behind him as he stood on the balcony. No, it was no simple matter to bring that under control and keep the slightest hint of a crack from appearing. Listen, listen carefully, and you can hear it this morning, too. The aftershock of an earthquake, the faint rumblings of a battle fought. No. It's no faint rumblings, no aftershock. It's the real thing, a raging battle, a veritable roar. Not many other people could hear that ruckus and push it aside, maintaining their perfect composure, looking

down on the masses early in the morning with an unbroken pose of perfect magnanimity and calm.

It happened all the time. There was no way of knowing when the blood would race to Viraja's head and, without warning, for no obvious reason, she'd start screaming, and he'd have to deal with it. It was a frequent sight at court: Mr Pani scaring the wits out of an opponent with one well-articulated grunt. The esteemed barrister had an appropriate reply for everything, no matter how many angry words were uttered, no matter how many arguments were presented. But this roar, this cursing and abusing, how did he deal with that? Simple. All he had to do was detach himself from it (once it took some effort, but now it came naturally to him) and wipe it from his mind, wipe it so clean that not a trace lingered. Go ahead, go ahead and say whatever you want .... Let me see .... So, it's my fault that the cook put too much water in the rice? And the maid broke a dish? A scorpion came into the bedroom through the drainpipe? The youngest one is going to the dogs, spoiling his health? Go ahead, keep on talking. No one's stopping you. Oh yes, and most important, don't forget to tell me how he is utterly ruining his life, all because of me. I'm listening, but only for a second. And then I tell myself, forget it. Wipe it clean. Most of it is all foolishness, anyway. Not a bit of truth to it. The youngest isn't going to the dogs at all. He is perfectly fine for his age. And you can't expect everyone to be in the shape I am, you know! As for the rest of your accusations, they don't amount to much of anything. And don't you think I know what you are up to? Don't you think I know how you spend your day, sitting there, hour after hour, legs outstretched, as if you haven't got a care in the world, chatting and gossiping, laughing about nothing in particular with all the women in the neighbourhood, young and old, smart and silly. Of course, I know all about it, even though you try to save those particular pleasures for the periods when I am not at home. Fine. So that's what our life together is like. No harm done. God is great. He sees to it that my clients go about their business, doing what they want concealed by the darkness of the night, while Viraja does what she wants

and says what she wants concealed by the curtain and the tradition that separates the women's quarters from the rest of the house. Nothing they do even so much as casts a shadow over my existence. Viraja has never even expressed the slightest desire to come out of seclusion, let alone come with me to the club or a party or public meeting. My worst nightmare, that she'd come out here and make a fuss in front of everyone, is just that—a nightmare, not a reality. It's all God's greatness. The society I frequent just assumes that my wife isn't like me, that she's totally different, that she's either an unsophisticated village girl or sick, or maybe that she's insane. It doesn't matter as long as no stain falls upon my self-image; nothing can ever touch that. Thank God.

This unbounded faith he displayed in God was another of Mr Pani's idiosyncrasies. As he went about primping and getting dressed for the day, he would touch his head to the feet of Krishna—his own Krishna, one that he kept in his own room (he wanted nothing to do with the horde of gods and goddesses that Viraja kept in her room)—and pour out his gratitude for God's great wisdom. The vulgar thought that for all he received he should perhaps offer something in return never crossed his mind. After all, did I ever send a present to Justice Gupta (who enjoyed seeing me win a case) or to any other judge or government minister? Have I ever behaved like Viraja, who in the midst of a fight interrupts her cursing to call on the Goddess, offering her a bribe, 'Mother, oh mother. Save me. I promise I'll offer you a pair of goats in return.' A shiver coursed up his spine at the very thought. All that congealed blood. Swarming flies. No, his relationship with God was refined, cultured, elegant, far, far above that of the masses. He was convinced of this. Maybe, that very conviction compelled him now and then to bow down a second time to his Krishna.

But there were moments, he had to admit, when he found something alluring in the love for God that he saw in his tailor, Damu. He didn't want to make too much of it, but he couldn't entirely dismiss it either. Damu was convinced that he was God's particular favourite, that God loved him. That was fine; nobody could stop him from

thinking so. And maybe Damu even thought that he had been blessed by God in some way or another. It would of course be wrong to assume that just because he was poor, Damu wasn't entitled to his rightful dues as a human being. Mr Pani was well aware of that. After all, you have to remember, Mr Pani would have described himself as a liberal; once, he had even been vice chairman of the All-Orissa Committee on Socialism. But he still found it curious that Damu considered himself to be God's intimate friend. He thought to himself, 'No doubt the fact that he considers himself to be a friend of a rich and famous man like me has put the notion in his head that he can be God's friend, too. And then there's all the things he tells me: How he wrestled and worked out with the strongest men in his youth and that's why he has such powerful muscles in his arms; sixty years old and he can sit all day at his sewing machine without even feeling tired; and Lord Jagannatha has seen to it that the rich and famous still come to him. Mr Pani couldn't help laughing. First of all, you operate the sewing machine with your foot, don't you? What do the muscles in your arms have to do with anything! Besides, so many tailoring shops have sprung up these days, run by smart-looking tailors in suits and ties. Who bothers to come to you now? Only a few old customers like your Mr Pani, who gives you an order for a suit now and then and comes away with a real bargain.' But Mr Pani never said a word of what he was thinking. He had no desire to deflate the tailor's boasts, even if they had been made half in jest. Mr Pani told himself that this was probably the only pure and uncorrupted amusement that he had in his life, the only source of unadulterated pleasure and joy that he could claim. It wouldn't be right to deprive himself of it. He was convinced of another thing, too: my children may go to some fancy tailor who is all the rage now, but I wouldn't give up my Damu for anything. You can't tell me that anyone is better at sewing. Besides, where would I find anyone who would entertain me like he does with his 'Lord Jagannatha is my friend, you are my friend'?

Damu always addressed Mr Pani with the familiar *tamé* for 'you' and never with the expected honorific *apana*. He even had a ready explanation. 'I use *apana* for people like Mr Shadangi and Mr Das; how could I speak to you that way? Ah, these days even you seem to keep your distance from me. But I can still remember when my father was alive and I used to trail after him wherever he went. Once, I went with him to your house, your old house. You asked me to lift you up so you could reach the fruits on the jujube tree. You slipped and scraped your knee. I was terrified that your father would blame it all on me. After all, I was the older one. But that wasn't like your father. He gave both of us a dirty look and shouted, "Stop it, both of you. Do I have to tie you up and give you a good thrashing? Didn't I tell you not to go into the yard? You little monkeys, good-for-nothing rascals!"'

Damu acted out the scene with such flair, frowned with such skill, and raised his voice with such authority that for a second Mr Pani believed it actually was his deceased father, Muktiar Narasimha Pani, standing there before him, stretched to his full height. And he was once again little Paru, fair-skinned like his mother, but short little Paru, gaping in awe at his father's might. As the spell broke, both Mr Pani and Damu laughed. Damu's round black face lit up with joy and from the gap where his front teeth should have been his laugh bellowed, as if from somewhere deep within him. Mr Pani couldn't help thinking, 'Who cares if any of that really happened. I don't even care if his father was my father's tailor. That's not the point. If Damu, for any reason, starts treating me formally, like some ordinary customer, I'll never forgive him!'

Damu was frightening to look at, as terrifying as Yama, the God of Death, himself. It was useless to try to compare him with his father or any other normal-looking person. No doubt no one had ever told him that you had to look after yourself, care a little about your appearance. His belly was growing fatter and fatter. His moustache was so long and unkempt that it threatened to swallow his lips completely. He didn't bother doing anything about his stubble until it itched so much

he had no choice but to shave, and he let the hair on his head grow wild in the same way, cutting it once every couple of months. His eyes were red and oval shaped, not round but elongated. They were slightly swollen at the corners. His chest was covered with hair. On a cold day, he draped a shawl over his shoulders; otherwise, he went bare-chested. He definitely looked like Yama, or more like Yama's stepbrother. For there was something in him that seemed totally laid-back; there was something totally nonchalant about him, something utterly compliant, as broad and expansive as the vast expanse of the earth itself. He seemed to act as if he thought that everything was really in the control of some superior being who acted and made others act; there was nothing in particular left for Damu himself to do. Occasionally, he would laugh uproariously, like he did when he remembered the incident of the jujube tree from his childhood, even though he seemed somehow to suggest that it was all so much wasted effort. But that didn't matter; when he had to laugh, he laughed with everything he had. With his pendulous belly, his lips shaking with delight, his full cheeks, and his clear, egg-shaped eyes. He knew how to command every part of himself to laugh, and every part of him in turn obeyed. He didn't scrimp on anything.

There were times when Mr Pani couldn't help wondering, 'What happens when he cries? Is it like his laugh? Does his whole world and everything in it cry with him?'

For some reason, he couldn't stop thinking about Damu today. A brief smile, the sure sign of something remembered, played on Mr Pani's lips. That lazy fellow has been supposed to make a pair of pants for me for the past six months. When I ask, he only says, 'Have I ever left you in the lurch? Don't I always bring whatever it is when you need it? Tell me. Tell me the truth.' He's right, of course. The truth is that no matter how long it may have taken him, he always shows up in time, walking with his jaunty step, the needed bundle of clothes held carefully under his arm. And whatever it is, it always fits just right. It never needs alteration. Last year there was the All-India Legal Rights

Conference. And before that there had been the Convention of the Young Men's Society (Mr Pani was then known as something of a leader in the Young Men's Society). And before that, well, there had always been something, some particular occasion for which he needed some clothes. Damu had always brought whatever it was just in time. Forget my pants. I don't really need them, but he can't be late with Niki's suit. Niki has an important interview next week. I told Niki, 'At least let Damu make your suit for the interview.' Why in the world did I say that? Because he's my 'friend'? Did I think that if Damu made the suit, my son would be successful in the interview? He would get a good position and my dreams would come true? That was about as far as Mr Pani got in trying to fathom his own motives. His moments on the balcony were over. It was time for him to move on to the study.

It was forbidden for anyone else to enter his study, including his clients. The rumblings and grumblings from the women's quarters were too far away to be heard there. The room was reserved for him to read and think about the law. Here God was in his own temple. And all was right with the world, or at least so it seemed. There was a family picture on the table, complete with smiling faces. There was Mr Pani's forever youthful face. Viraja had a serious look on her face, but she was still young in the picture. On either side of them were their two young sons, Sanjay and Malay, better known as Tiki and Niki. Their broad grins revealed bright, shining teeth.

A picture-perfect family. It wouldn't be exactly true to say that when he looked at it, he could wipe away the unhappiness of his married life entirely, but he could at least push it aside temporarily. Sometimes it even seemed to him that between him and Viraja there had once been that miraculous thing called love. If not Sanjay, at least Malay was proof of that. That evening after we made love, a gentle breeze came through the window, refreshing us as we lay there, spent. It came from the south, redolent with the fragrance of sandalwood, the vernal wind that the poets call the 'malay'. That was why I said that if from our lovemaking came a son, we should name him Malay; if it was

a daughter, we should call her Sarasi, 'Lady of the Lake' (on its way to us, the breeze had gently touched the lake that bordered our old house). That was a fact. Who could deny it?

Today, as he looked at the picture, Niki, otherwise known as Malay, took hold of his thoughts. He is a clever one, is Niki. He isn't a bookworm like his elder brother. He has to be up to the minute in everything; he loves to go out and have fun with his friends. But when he puts his mind to something he can master it with an astonishing thoroughness. My wife says he's going to the dogs. Well, if the elder one hadn't fallen into her clutches, he wouldn't have become a worthless schoolteacher. Thank God the younger one is different. He has the makings of a leader. Why, he could even become a government minister. He doesn't have to go that far, but at least he can get a good government posting. The important thing is not how much money you make but how much authority you have. In that, don't you think he can outdo his father? Of course he can. Now that they've called him for an interview, there's nothing more to worry about. He is a smart young man. He'll be able to hold his own, even with the scions of the wealthiest families! And he knows that when you answer a question you have to do it in such a way that the person who has asked the question has no idea that you've just made a complete fool of him. He is my son all right, the true son of a skilled lawyer! Mr Pani was overcome with a subtle blend of fatherly love and self-importance. But ... it wasn't really necessary to say, but sometimes even in the face of unbeatable arguments and incontrovertible proof, a case could be lost. There was no sense in cursing the judge. Everything required God's blessing. Mr Pani spun around in his swivel chair as if he were looking to see on which side God was.

But, clever as he is, Niki is just as impulsive. Once, he even said he wasn't going to take the government exams; it just wasn't for him. He had other leads to follow, other things to do (not all of them very desirable, and some of them quite shady). Dear God. Mr Pani felt shivers run down his spine. That couldn't happen. He couldn't let that

happen. But what can I do about it? he wondered. That was when he remembered Damu. No matter how much I trust Damu, I can't wait until the last minute. This is no ordinary suit. He'll have to try it on. I'll have to make sure that it is absolutely perfect, not too tight anywhere, not too loose, no unwanted creases. I won't let Damu get away with anything less than perfection. I had better get someone to bring him here today.

No, it won't do to send someone for him. I had better go myself. I had better see just how far along he is. And I had better let him know in no uncertain terms that he has to get on with it.

That was how Mr Pani came to the decision that after court he would go to Damu the tailor's shop. He was not about to listen to any argument. But if you go there you'll lose your advantage. He'll start with his stories again, and you'll be taken in. Nonsense! Do you think I am a child? Do you think I am really a friend who climbed jujube trees with him? I do that on purpose; I allow myself to appear to be swept away by his stories just to make him happy. And for that you think I would forget my urgent task? Do you think I couldn't scowl at him, too, if I had to? ... Have you forgotten what his street is like, the sickening sucking sound the mud makes under your feet, mud so deep that even a bullock cart couldn't get through it? And the sight of the naked children squatting over the open sewers? Have you forgotten about the pairs of eyes that will fix you in their hostile stares? ... I don't care! The poverty of India is nothing new to me. Besides, Mr Pani is no upstart nouveau riche. He's a real gentleman, from an old family. If I walk down the filthy lane to Damu the tailor's shop, and if that increases Damu's prestige in the eyes of his neighbours, so what? What's that to me? It doesn't thereby lessen my standing in the world ... Jealousy is nibbling away at your chest, invisible, crunch, crunch, like a tiny mouse. His house is behind the shop, his temple. He's the one who is really happy, not you. He may look like Yama, the God of Death, or, even worse, like the buffalo the God of Death rides, but his wife loves him and each one of his six or eight children,

whatever the number, is a joy, a draught of the elixir of immortality, a gift of God ... Nonsense!

Nonsense! He flung this out more than once at this last suggestion. The mountain in the distance is always beautiful. I can get dreamy and romantic at times, and that day, for some reason or another, I must have been particularly susceptible. That's why I reacted the way I did to his saying all those silly things about his wife and children. He started out proclaiming how Lord Jagannatha had given him hands that were skilled in all the arts; not only was he good at sewing, but he could also cut betel into small, delicate pieces, and (this he whispered, as if he were telling a secret) he was expert at combing and plaiting his wife's hair. Then he told me how his son Ratan shared his history lessons with him and taught him about the greatness of Nilachala, where Lord Jagannatha lives. His daughter Muduli was such a good cook and made delicious vegetable curry. His son Sarava was just like his mother; he was so fair-skinned that he could pass for the son of an Englishman. And Sapna, the youngest, liked to use her father's big belly as a drum. When she beat on it, he would forget there was such a thing as hunger. That day it seemed to me that this was true happiness, not what we had. Because Damu was poor by conventional standards, he was rich on other accounts. What nonsense! I never wished him ill, but there was never any question that I was in any way in competition with him. His children might not sit on a chair to do their homework, but let them learn a few things. Let his daughters find good husbands ... and his wife .... What did I have to say about his wife? Let him look after his own wife! Mr Pani quickly averted his eyes from the obscene vision of Damu and his wife's love (sex). And, as if he had proven beyond any shadow of a doubt that this last suggestion, that he was jealous, was total nonsense, he resolved once and for all that today he would go to Damu's. He would take Niki with him. He would see about that suit for Niki!

Unfortunately, before he ever got to Damu's, a few things happened to disturb Mr Pani's usual composure. Mr Pani was not to blame. He

might be strong and mighty, like Bhishma of old in the Mahabharata, but you can't forget that even Bhishma was brought low by an unlikely adversary, the young man Shikhandin, who in a former birth had been a princess Bhishma had scorned. Never mind. Let us just say that every Bhishma has at least one Shikhandin, and maybe more. Mr Pani's main Shikhandin was the advocate Dhaneshvara Patra. He was hardly much to look at: thin, his face pockmarked, his voice effeminate. He was an expert in divorce and family law. The mere sight of the fellow made Mr Pani shudder. Today he had bumped into him in the Bar Library. He asked something or the other, and not getting an answer, he was off and running: 'What's new, Mr Pani? How is your wife? How are your children?' Useless, effeminate fellow. What difference could it possibly make to you how they are? What do you take me for, one of your cronies, one of your clients? Then there was Niki. It was on Niki's account that he had decided to go to Damu's in the first place. Now Niki tells me that he won't be home in the evening. He is driving to Calcutta with some friend to see a cricket match. That meant it was useless to go to Damu's. Who says it's useless? I have made up my mind. I am going. So what if Niki doesn't go with me. I can tell whether the suit will fit him or not; I don't need him there. But that evening as Mr Pani made his way down Damu's alley, carefully lifting his pants and trying to step over the mud puddles (he'd had to leave the car at the main road, some distance away), he was distracted by the sight of the neighbourhood children playing cricket. It reminded him of how much Niki liked cricket. Maybe he was a hopeless case; maybe he wasn't destined to find happiness as a big government officer, a judge or something like that. Just as this thought ran through his mind, the cricket ball hit him, leaving an ugly stain on his pants. You wouldn't have expected that not to bother him, now, would you?

'Come in, come in, sir. I was just thinking about you. It's been a long time, hasn't it? I went to your house so many times, but you were never there. But is something the matter? You don't look well. Are you feeling all right? You look pale. And what's become of that smile of yours?'

This somewhat long-winded welcome didn't bother Mr Pani nearly as much as the sympathetic questions about his appearance. Who are you to pass judgement on my appearance? I'm perfectly fine. There's nothing the least bit the matter with me. It's just that I've had the misfortune to have to walk down this miserable alley you live on. But it wasn't easy to be angry with Damu. And so Mr Pani kept quiet. He made no objection when Damu gestured to him to enter. There was the chair he usually sat on; one of Damu's children ran and fetched a cushion for it. It was a bit worn out, but it was still velvet. Damu sat cross-legged on the bed in his usual fashion, and as if he were about to open some important ceremony he uttered the customary words of blessing, 'Lord Jagannatha is great!' Although none of this was the least bit unusual, Mr Pani couldn't help feeling that Damu was being particularly solicitous to ensure that nothing was lacking in his attentiveness to his guest; he seemed to want to be absolutely sure that Mr Pani was perfectly comfortable and in no way inconvenienced.

But Mr Pani was not to be distracted from the important purpose for which he had come all this way. He waited a few moments, and then, striking a pose of utmost gravity, he asked, 'How far have you progressed with the suit?'

'Suit? Oh-ho. The suit for the young master Niki? I get it. Don't worry. It will be ready. I'll deliver it to you on time. There's nothing to worry about.'

Mr Pani was on the verge of saying, 'Of course there's nothing for you to worry about. Niki isn't your son; no son of yours is about to go for an interview and never will be.' But he managed to restrain himself. Instead, with as much authority as he could muster, he merely said, 'No, I can't wait until the last minute. If you haven't already cut the cloth, give it back to me. I'll give it to someone else.'

Mr Pani was prepared to be even harsher. But he hoped that this would be enough to produce the desired effect. He was sure that Damu would be bowled over by the words; mouth agape, he would stare at Mr Pani in disbelief. Then he would pretend to be insulted,

mortally wounded by the suggestion. His eyes would fill with tears. Another possible scenario was that he would get aggressive. He would say, 'What are you talking about, my friend? You want to take the cloth back from me? I never thought I'd hear you say anything like that to me! Do you think master Niki is only your son, he's nothing to me?' He was prepared to deal with such sentimental scenes, the likes of which could only be found in some trashy novel or grade-B movie. If he was adept at manipulating sentimentality in the courtroom to win a case for a client, he was also a master at exposing the uselessness of his opponent's sentimental displays. But could it be that Damu was going to disappoint him? Wasn't he going to treat him to such a show of emotion? An astonished Mr Pani waited for some reaction.

All Damu did was gently shake his head. And then he said, 'Fine.'

But he still showed no sign of getting up to fetch the cloth. Surely, there had to be a limit to laziness! Mr Pani was beginning to feel that he had good reason to be angry when Damu finally spoke. His words seemed deliberate, carefully chosen. 'Give the cloth to whomever you please. Young master Niki will be successful in the interview. I can promise you that.'

This was also a weapon. Flattery. This could yet prove amusing. Let's see. Mr Pani pretended to be surprised as he asked, 'Really? Who told you that? The chairman of the committee?'

'No, sir. What would I know of the chairman or whatever you call him? Lord Jagannatha told me. The grandfather of everyone, the grandfather even of your chairman! The day you came and ordered the suit for Niki, I saw it all again, dancing in front of my eyes ... he was tiny, as tiny as a little mouse. No one could say whether he would live or die ...'

He remembered. Niki was born prematurely, after only seven months. Viraja was sick with something or the other and gave birth to the baby too soon. The delivery was so complicated that the doctor told him it would not be possible to save the child. And what did I say to the doctor? What did I plead with God to do? No, no, I didn't. I

couldn't have. I couldn't have begged, let Viraja die, but let my son live. The older one has become hopeless; he never listens to me. But this one I can mould; I can shape him into someone just like myself. He won't have any mother to ruin him. That's a lie. A dirty lie, the figment of some diseased imagination! Not mine. Viraja's. It must have been then that she began to fall apart, began to accuse me of all sorts of sick behaviour, when she was the sick one.

'When I saw that baby, what I saw was young master Niki. He was standing right in front of me, a young man, with a wisp of a moustache, impatient to conquer the world. Who caused him to stand there like that, right in front of my eyes? Lord Jagannatha! That Lord Jagannatha! The baby was crying, and you were all so worried. But not me. I was calm and cool. Do you remember?'

No, I don't remember. At such a moment why would I have paid attention to what the tailor was doing, even if his father had been my father's tailor? How could I have noticed the expression on the tailor's face at such a time of crisis! But could it possibly be true that his Lord Jagannatha had let him know in some way or the other that this bawling baby would one day wear a suit? Conquer the world? It wasn't impossible. Damu might be an ordinary tailor, but in some way he seemed to have been singled out by God for his special blessings. I'd probably have to admit that he was more devoted to God than I was. It wasn't enough to try to lull God into thinking you counted Him as a friend; no doubt Damu also worshipped God with all due respect and esteem. Mr Pani began to see Damu in a new light. Was it possible that his Lord Jagannatha had told him something about Niki? Or even about me? Mr Pani kept looking at Damu's world, a world he now saw as enormous and pregnant with secrets, the wa) a tiny creature might gaze upon a lofty mountain, with wonder.

Suddenly Mr Pani had the sensation that he could hear Niki's wailing. Am I losing my mind? It must be this stuffy room; the foul miasma from the alley makes it seem even closer and more oppressive. I can't breathe with all these children, all these scraps of cloth all

around me. I must be reacting somehow to this whole atmosphere; I'm not used to being in such a place. But no. What he heard was real. Real crying. It wasn't the crying of an infant; it was the crying of an older child. It sounded to him like a girl's voice. Someone stuck their head in the room from behind a curtain and then disappeared again. To Mr Pani, it seemed that something was happening there, in a place concealed by the mountain, by the world that existed there, in a place forbidden to the stranger, the outsider.

Damu could see that Mr Pani was at a loss; he smiled gently and said, 'It's my daughter Muduli. She's crying. She can't stand the pain.'

'What's wrong with her?' Mr Pani could no longer keep from asking.

'Who can say? Do I know? Do you know? Does anyone know, even the homeopathic doctors or the doctors of Western medicine? Dr Jamal Miam was here. He took her to his office and took a picture of her belly. He did all kinds of tests. In the end, he had some big name for it. He said it was something or the other. He got the name out of a book. What good is that to me? Just because we are both human, does that mean that Damu is exactly the same as Mr Pani? My daughter's sickness is my daughter's sickness; her laughter and her tears belong to her and to her alone; the whys and wherefores of it are hers alone. Only Lord Jagannatha knows. Only Jagannatha can understand. I gave her medicine. She just cries. From time to time, she smiles and tells me how a friend taught her to make meat curry. She'll make some just for me when she gets better. Four or five years ago my son Ratan said the same things to me. He said, "I'll teach you how to play cricket when I get better." Something happened to him that night, though, and he was in the hospital for three or four months. In the end, even the doctors seemed to lose hope. But did that son of mine let me off the hook? Didn't he make me learn to play cricket? I knew it all along. Lord Jagannatha had told me ...'

Damu was interrupted by the sounds of Muduli's crying, which had grown louder and more pitiful. The face appeared from behind the curtain again, no doubt to call Damu inside. 'It'll pass, it'll pass,

my sweet one. You won't have to suffer much longer. Not too much longer.' With those words, Damu got up and went inside.

Mr Pani took comfort in the fact that he wouldn't have to sit there much longer. The truth was, he was not only entranced by what he was seeing, he was also frightened. Damu and his Lord Jagannatha, the earth and the heavens, seemed to be coming together and coming closer to him at the same time. The meaning of it all escaped him.

It goes without saying that that was the last anyone heard about returning the cloth. But when Mr Pani was leaving, Damu assured him in a voice loud enough for all the neighbours to hear, 'Don't worry. I'll deliver master Niki's suit in plenty of time. I just got a little behind, what with my daughter being sick.'

Niki's interview went off without a hitch. He was convinced that they had liked him best of all the candidates; that was why they had asked him more questions than they had asked anyone else—from his opinions about the latest cricket stars to issues of world peace. He hadn't a shred of doubt that he would do more than pass. Mr Pani was about to complete the sentence by adding, 'You'll conquer the world, I know.' And in his mind he winked at Damu.

But soon with the pressure of all his work he forgot all about Damu. He remembered him when someone told him in confidence, even before the results were made public, that Niki had passed the interview. He was now one of the elite corps of civil servants. First he went to tell Viraja. 'Your son is a government officer; he's been taken into no less than the Indian Administrative Service!' He got her out of bed, took her plump hand in his and shook it firmly. But that wasn't all. He did all he could to restrain himself from giving his wife a big kiss. It wasn't that his lips particularly longed to touch hers; he just wanted to tell her that the last trace of the 'malay' breeze might be gone but now it was time to make room for the golden throne of the future. In any case, Mr Pani had the unmistakable feeling that he had gained something precious. For Viraja didn't say a word but smiled at him with a lovely smile. It had been a long time since she had seemed

so pretty to him. And that was when he remembered Damu. He couldn't share his good news with anyone except his family (and his elder son was not home; he was studying at some college far away); the news was still not public. But surely there was no harm in telling Damu. Yes, he had to tell Damu. He had to tell him that his son, wearing Damu's suit, had indeed conquered the world. Just like his Lord Jagannatha had told him, right from the beginning.

In his impatience, Mr Pani didn't even care if his clients had to wait for him. He left them sitting there and set out for Damu's. He would be late to court, and there was a big case coming up today, but he hadn't time to think about that either. It was already rush hour and the street was crowded.

When he got to Damu's he found Damu's son, Ratan, at the sewing machine. There was no one else around.

'Where's your father?'

At this question, Ratan only raised his head slightly and stared at Mr Pani with a vacant look.

'He's not here. He's been at Puri, at the temple of Jagannatha, for the last month.'

'Why? What's he been doing there?'

'He's been there ever since Muduli died.'

'What did you say? Muduli? Ever since Muduli died?' It took Mr Pani a few minutes to absorb this news. And then he began to feel strangely angry. It was as if, he felt, he was being blamed, as if they were all trying to get him. He shouted, 'That's ridiculous. Impossible. Muduli died? How could Muduli die? And he didn't say a word to me? He didn't even send someone to tell me? Could he have been so deceitful, to lie to me ...'

Ratan tried to make him understand that his father went to Puri the very next day. He said that he had to let Mr Pani know, but not right now. Later. There was some interview now. He was supposed to come back the day before yesterday, but he decided to stay on since today was the day they would dress Lord Jagannatha in his royal

robes. He wanted to see the ceremony, and he'd come back when it was over.

Watching God get dressed in his royal robes. How ridiculous. Mr Pani's hand was pressed hard against the sewing table. But a few seconds later he looked away. He was afraid he would break down and cry. Not in sorrow but in impotent anger and a dismal sense of defeat.

And you still want to see Him decked out like a king, dressed in His royal robes? That very God who is so shameless that he can still stand before you, gloating over his own power? I am your king. I can cheat you, deceive you, save your son, kill your daughter, be truthful to you, lie to you. I am your Lord and Master. Never forget!

Mr Pani had regained his composure. He was home. He told himself over and over again that he would never go back there. He had no faith in the God to whom these people were so devoted. Who knows, Lord Jagannatha might set a trap for me and get me in his clutches, too. After all, wasn't it He who caused Niki to conquer the world?

No, nothing will happen to me. I'm safe. Am I a fool like that Damu? Mr Pani turned to thinking of his own Lord Krishna as he shook the dust and dirt from his suit.

The Lullaby

Don't ask me exactly what the line 'Fly away little birdie' is supposed to mean; it's enough that everyone knows it is something that puts little children to sleep. There are so many songs like it in English and in different languages all over the world. So many songs, meaningless strings of mellifluous words, all just to put children to sleep. For, the little rascals don't go to sleep that easily. They haven't yet learned how to count their sheep. But the task can't be left to Mother Nature. In that case, they might go to sleep at some inconvenient time; why, they might be awake half the night, driving their parents to utter distraction! You're asking for even more trouble if you give them a good spanking to try to get rid of them. The only thing to do is to let them get a whiff of the words of the lullaby, fool them, lull them gently to sleep, so that their eyes will close all on their own and the poor little creatures will have no choice but to float off to the land of sleep.

But who has the time and patience for such things? Let grandma do it; she has nothing better to do. Or if not grandma, then grandpa. For them, time is like a swing in perpetual motion, back and forth, back and forth, without stop. It's so easy for them to get bored, swinging on it by themselves; so much better for them to be with the little ones, gently letting the swing rock to and fro. They'll have the pleasure of company. And it might even turn out that before the little ones fall asleep, sleep will have closed grandma's or grandpa's eyes.

I think I could safely say that the picture of Ganeshvara putting his grandson to sleep would not have been at all unusual in our culture. Bhaskar, better known as Bhusha, would have been three years old at the time to which I am referring. But if you went a bit closer to the pair of grandson and grandfather, you'd see that there was something different about this particular scene. First, you'd notice that this

grandfather was not a particularly old man and there was no reason to suspect that he would be the first one to fall asleep. His beady eyes darted here and there. If anything, he seemed to be getting ready for the struggle; in one way or another, he would get the child to sleep. Everything else could wait. As the old Sanskrit saying goes, 'One must do one's duty or forsake one's life.' Second, although he didn't make any obvious mistakes as he sang, it was hard to understand how his singing could lull a clever and active child like Bhusha to sleep. You couldn't exactly call his voice sweet, after all. When he sang, 'Fly away little birdie, to a field full of seed, there you will find the sleep that you need,' you had the feeling that he would gobble up the poor little bird rather than send it gently off to sleep in some field of grain or seed. And the last words were so garbled that it must have been difficult, indeed, for the child to know what was supposed to become of the little bird.

Despite all this, Bhusha's lips slowly stopped trembling. That was not all; he even seemed to be smiling, as if he were carried away by some pleasure or had fallen under the spell of some unusual delight. It seemed to me that this was his way of saying 'thank you' to his grandfather for his untiring effort. His eyelids fluttered, as if to tease his grandfather one last time, and then they were still. You could count every one of his long black lashes. Soon you could see clearly every little strong and weak point in his face; it was as if he had magnanimously proclaimed to all and sundry, 'Take a good look now. Take a look. Look at the blemishes on my cheeks and the freckles on my chin. Look, how long my ears are; look, how dirty my nose is. But how could any of you measure the depths of the satisfaction I feel now?'

Indeed, it was beyond measure. Although no one else could understand it, Bhusha's father Naresh and his mother Nandini shared in it to a large degree. In general, Naresh was short on patience. When he was in a good mood, he would encourage his son's efforts to fight off sleep. He would stop singing and sit and play with him. He would

pinch his belly button and ruffle his hair. And if his mother Nandini was in a good mood, she would pretend to be angry when she saw them like that, and yell, 'The father's just as bad as the son! Get up. Get up.' But when their bodies were tired and their minds weary, it was altogether a different story. Naresh would find his son's resistance intolerable and give him a good slap. When she heard her son crying, Nandini would come running in honest-to-goodness anger. She would make her husband get up, roughly pull her son onto her lap and give him a few good whacks. Needless to say, what they did was not very effective in getting the little one to sleep. The only difference was this: when the father and mother were in good moods, the son ended up making the mother mad, and when the father and mother were in bad moods to start with, he ended up making his mother cry. The result was the same, though: Bhusha stayed awake hour after hour. All the lovely little birdie songs seemed to have come to naught.

(This husband and wife were almost always in the same mood, almost always happy or unhappy at the same time, but more about that later.)

It was a different story when his grandpa was there. Bhusha would instantly fall asleep when his grandpa sang his out-of-tune 'Fly away little birdie'. No one else had the same effect on him or would ever have. From the very day of his birth, there had been ample proof of this. Even Bhusha's grandma, who had tried again and again to insist that this simply wasn't the case, that this was just another of grandpa's tall tales, had to admit defeat in the end. Grandpa did know some kind of magic that could put Bhusha to sleep, just like that.

On the day that I am talking about, grandpa had worked his magic. Bhusha had been out of sorts all day long; he was sick, with a bad cold and cough. The weather was also miserable. But none of that deterred Bhusha; with his usual stubbornness he had insisted on going out with his mother and father. Ganeshvara called him over and made him sit down beside him; he told Bhusha stories, saving his magic charm for the last. It was not long after he began to sing his 'Fly away little birdie'

that Bhusha came under its spell. Naresh and Nandini were watching this little miracle from behind the curtain that hung over the door to the room; they whispered to each other that it was now safe for them to make their getaway.

Naresh and Nandini got as far as the front door, when Ganeshvara's unwanted question stopped them.

'Where are you going in weather like this?'

They had a very straightforward answer. 'We're not children. Where we go and when we go are none of your business. It's useless for you even to ask us; what's more, you've no right to ask us, you know. Anyway, the whole point of all of this was that we wanted to go out, wasn't it? Otherwise, why did you bother going through your rigmarole?' But, if this was the answer they wanted to give, they never got all the words out. Surely grandpa's 'rigmarole', his 'Fly away little birdie', did not deserve to be lumped together with ordinary tricks that people used when pressed by circumstances; grandpa's song, with all its power, seemed to exist in a world of its own, a world that didn't demand any external reason for it to work. In any case, Naresh felt that he still owed Ganeshvara some answer; Ganeshvara was his father, after all. He was about to say something when Nandini interrupted him (she never could wait; she always had to be first in everything) and said, 'We're going to the F.P. Party office.'

'Party?'

It was too late to concoct a story. Over her husband's scowl, Nandini had to explain, 'The Friends of the Poor Party. We have an appointment with the general organizer of the party, Jagannath Saha.'

Ganeshvara was smart enough not to ask any more questions. After a few seconds of silence, he merely muttered, 'Oh, fine.' He knew all about the Friends of the Poor Party; he knew about the violence its members committed in their efforts to do good for the poor, and he knew that they had themselves become the target of violence. But it was a legitimate political party, and not all of the leaders were corrupt; one day they might even come to power. Ganeshvara was clear on

these points, too. And yet none of this changed the fact that Naresh was his son. Besides, he was convinced that Naresh was different; he was not like the others. He was easily carried away by anything, and he was ready to join everything; in his excitement over whatever it was that someone was saying, he'd jump up and down and dance for joy, and if he lost he'd never admit defeat. Surely, Ganeshvara thought, he was one of a kind. There couldn't be another one like him on earth. He was like a butterfly, a butterfly with a tad too much hubris. So what if this particular flower doesn't have any honey? So what if that flower is clearly saying, 'Stay away! Stay away!'? He didn't care. There were other flowers on this earth, other temptations. Maybe that was why he had never progressed very far in his studies and had given up midstream; his financial situation got worse, but still the butterfly would flit about as if it hadn't a care in the world. You see it, don't you? Its wings are a rainbow of colours; its tremulous flight has a sparkling grace. As if its sole purpose in life is to kiss the Goddess Earth from her head to the tips of her toes; to hell with all that rubbish you talk about heaven and hell. Haven't you noticed that? It's no wonder that everyone loves him. Just because you're his father, does that mean you have to be the exception?

Listen, my son. Of course, I love you. Do you think I only say that now because I'm dependent on you in my old age? When you were in school, you taught me so much about so many distant places. Many were the times when I thought you would enter government service and become a famous judge (don't forget, in high school and college you were a topper). There were other times when I felt that you would become a distinguished professor of biology or botany (that was because for a long time you were crazy about fruits and flowers and all kinds of living creatures). I even thought that you might become a famous musician and music critic (you had such a sweet voice, not like mine. And you gave so many concerts, singing in the style of Muhammad Rafi). In the end, you served me notice that you intended to do something for society (I've heard that it's been largely due to

your efforts that our housing colony now has a children's garden, a library, and some kind of a society known as the Centre for Preparedness for the Future). So, I guess I'd have to say, what's so strange about you eventually getting involved in politics? I knew all along that if it wasn't the F.P. Party it would be some other, that you would spread your wings once more and that new and distant lands, the very ends of the earth, would beckon you. Do you think I am unfazed by your incredible restlessness? I am your father, am I not? I have felt it, and I have wanted to touch that body of yours which I've known all these twenty-six years, to pat it gently and then (I admit it) to say, 'Come, my precious, and lie down by my side for a minute. I'll rub your back, I'll give you a massage ... and I'll sing for you the song that I used to sing to you, long, long ago ...'

It dawned on Ganeshvara that they had been gone for some time. And as soon as he realized it, he began to sing like one possessed. His voice was raspy, and the words seemed to come in a rush, almost despite himself. 'Fly away little birdie ...' There was no reason for him to be singing; Bhusha was fast asleep.

Maybe I couldn't have said anything to him. But his wife Nandini is smart and educated; couldn't she have stopped him? Doesn't she know that 'the ends of the earth' means just that, the end of the world, the end of the line? Surely, my daughter-in-law is intelligent enough to figure that out?

Ganeshvara's musings on how much his daughter-in-law should or could have figured out might have remained for him just a sad reflection, but instead they turned to anger. For at that very moment his wife Kiranavala appeared before him, all smiles.

'Why don't you go and lie down? You must be tired. The child's asleep. Why do you feel you always have to say something?'

Ganeshvara stared at his wife. He was sure that even the tips of his moustache must be trembling with rage. He replied, 'I'll go to sleep when all of you are in bed. Do you hear me?'

Kiranavala took his words literally. She laughed, 'Oh, that's a new one. What do you mean "all of you"? Naresh and his wife are gadding about town. Bhusha's the only one asleep. And I don't sleep during the day, don't you know?'

It's not exactly true to say that the pretty, shapely, and now middle-aged Kiranavala was stupid. But it probably is true that anyone else in her position would have realized that her husband's words had a meaning beyond the simply literal, namely, that he was angry and so worried about all of them that he couldn't sleep even if he wanted to.

But that was only a part of what he wanted to say; it was the obvious part but not the whole thing. It was no more than a bright flash of lightning, a word or two from the store of grievances he had accumulated over his sixty years of living. I suspect that neither you nor I would have understood what exactly were the experiences in his life which convinced Ganeshvara that he had a perfect right to his anger. In any case, today there was no one else around, just his not too terribly clever wife, and so he let her see a few of its sparks. Ganeshvara himself probably couldn't have listed everything that lay behind his present emotions; if he had written it all down, he would only have drawn a line through it to scratch it all out. He would have denied it all. 'No, no. I'm not that different from everyone else in this world. I'm not sitting on this train alone. There are other passengers on the train with me. Don't you think that they can see things, too? That they can think, too? Do you think that this is all just some bee in *my* bonnet and no one else feels this way?'

It was all that train's fault. The train was the first villain of the piece. The first bee in the bonnet. The symbol. Once, long ago, when he was a young man, he was travelling in a train; it was a moonlit night and there were hosts of stars in the sky. Out of his window he could see bushes, thick jungle, people sitting on benches in deserted stations, naked children clapping their hands in delight, sparrows diving into the glistening silver water. He watched it all go by and wanted only to see more and more of it; if only the train would never stop.

Ah! Can't you stay in one place even for a minute? Can't you ever say to yourself, this is my home, this is where I belong, if only for a minute or two, this is my world? No, there's no resting. That's my curse. I was born with it. All I could ever do was fritter away my time, run from one thing to the next. Couldn't I have stopped to chat with the shimmering moon that peeped at me from behind its fingers, its round face smiling, just for me? No, no, that's impossible. The moon's got nothing to do with me! My only friend now is that tall barren tree with the tuft of leaves at its top. It'll tell me something about its own search, its sufferings .... No, the tree's gone now, too. It's run away .... The tree's nothing to me, either. For me, running is all there is. I'll run and I'll run ... and I'll die running.

Run, run as fast as you can. Snatch the minutes, all those cherished minutes that you want. When I was a child and came first in my class, my father put his arms around me and held me close. But it was no use. I couldn't hold fast even to that one minute. As if admitting defeat, I tripped over my untied shoelaces and fell down. Everyone was laughing at me.

I had never even kissed Kirana. Before I knew it, she was my wife. Then my job took hold of me. Where to? Why, up and up. One had to move up the ladder. What difference does it make if the boss is angry? I didn't get demoted, did I? Then Savita was born. Wasn't that a chance to rest, a little comma in your life to make you pause? No, before I knew it she was getting married. Her smooth body slipped from my hands; skilfully, she eluded my grasp. I hadn't even sung my best 'Fly away birdie' to her! Then came Naresh. He was totally captivated by my 'Fly away little birdie', and I revelled in the touch of the little body that was often covered with dust and dirt. I revelled in it, and I thought to myself, here's a place where I could stay. No, no. It'll be the same. He'll only get up and run away from me one day; he'll grow up and become a man. Then you can run with him. Yes, run with him.

The one I led into this house, her hand in mine, is just the same. We married each other for love. But did that mean we would have to be inseparably joined together for all time, in all things?

My wife doesn't seem to care about anything; she doesn't even seem to think about anything. For her, it's all the same, sitting, sleeping, running, crawling. She's content to let time carry her on its back wherever it goes, like a mother carrying her baby. And now she comes and says to me, 'What are you doing? Go to sleep!' As if she wanted to show me how much she cares about me!

Tell me this: Has there ever been anyone, in all these years, since the very day I was born, has there ever been anyone, my mother or father, my family, this so-called society of yours, even God Himself, who has permitted me the luxury of sleep?

Whatever the truth, Kiranavala finally realized that there was no hope of getting an answer from her husband in his present state of mind. She could tell that he was dead earnest about something. She might not always have been able to recognize that what he felt was in fact anger, but she did realize that, whatever it was, it was something serious. As she walked away, she couldn't help repeating what had by now become one of her pet peeves: 'How many times did I tell you (how many times did you let me tell you?) that after you retired you should get involved in something? Then you wouldn't be sitting around here with that long face all the time. You should find a hobby or something to entertain you like your brother, the lawyer, did.'

It was not only cold outside; by now, it had also started to rain. The worst of it was that the threat of rain had hung in the air for a long time, a rain that would soak you through, pierce through your skin to your very vitals and make your bones tremble. But the rain came, and on their way home Naresh and Nandini seemed equally determined to make the best of the rain's sly game. After they had recovered from the initial shock of being pelted with the cold drops, they were tempted to break out into a sappy duet, like two famous movie stars nestled together under a single umbrella, cooing sweet nothings to each other. Alas, they had no umbrella. But who could stop them from huddling together under a tree by the side of the road? And who would dare to say that a silly song like *Singing in the*

rain didn't fit the occasion? Of course, it was only Naresh who burst into song. Nandini hummed her part. The song was an old one that could be heard now and then on the radio; it wasn't surprising that Nandini couldn't quite remember the tune or the words. It was different for Naresh; no doubt he'd heard the song from his father more than once.

Nandini realized this and abruptly stopped singing. She felt a sudden surge of compassion as she asked, 'Your father used to sing this song, didn't he? He knows so many songs. But he doesn't have much of a voice. I wonder what happened to his voice.'

Naresh smiled at her. There was a touch of sadness in his voice as he answered, 'It's just old age.'

'He's not that old. Don't be silly. I've seen plenty of people his age. They're still perfectly fit in body and mind; they eat right and they take good care of themselves. Their voices are strong and clear. The truth is, your father has let himself go,' Nandini objected.

But Naresh was not in a mood to argue. He hadn't dared to hope that the leaders of the F.P. Party, particularly the younger leaders, would show such confidence in him and give him so much encouragement. They didn't just praise his constant efforts to better social conditions; they seemed to beckon him to join them as one of the elect. 'We want you. We want young men like you who won't remain ordinary workers. Who'll burn with their zeal to carry out party work.' This may not have been their exact words, but it captures their meaning. I knew that I'd find a place for myself in politics, a place for my service, my courage, and my dedication. I'm a good speaker, and besides I have a clever wife. Where else but in politics would due credit be given to all these things? I won't remain an ordinary party worker, I'll become a leader. I'll definitely become a leader. I'm not afraid of anything. And the words that he sang under that tree in the rain were like echoes of the joy that throbbed in his veins. *I'm just singin' in the rain ...*

Naresh was not about to spoil his light-hearted song with troublesome thoughts about just how much truth there was in

Nandini's words, whether his father had let himself go or whether age had simply overtaken him. And then he remembered. All he had to do was quote what he had heard his mother say again and again.

'It probably would have been better if Father got involved in something. I guess things like this happen to people if they don't stay active.'

'Exactly! But in that case he wouldn't have moved in with us. He wouldn't be home all the time. Just think of what would have happened to poor Bhusha.'

'Exactly! In that case, who would have been there to put Bhusha to sleep by singing "Fly away little birdie"?'

At that, both of them laughed loudly, forgiving Ganeshvara for what they saw as his indolence. Although they might agree with Kiranavala, they let it be known that they belonged to a different generation—modern, tolerant.

It was getting late, and her son and daughter-in-law were not back. More than once, Kiranavala stuck her head into the room where grandson and grandfather were sleeping to give vent to her mounting anxieties. They hadn't even taken an umbrella with them; her son was wearing some thin old sweater; it was March already, and yet the weather was so unreliable. She didn't need to try to find out if her husband was still in a bad mood or was himself again; she was certain that he would be fine by now. She had never really worried that his anger would explode; such a thought had never occurred to her. If you asked her, she might have smiled back at you and said, 'Well, anger or affection, it takes some effort to show either one, doesn't it?'

And the truth was that tonight Ganeshvara's anger, after flaring up a bit, had long subsided. Not that he could sleep. How could he go to sleep before he knew that Bhusha was really in a deep sleep? But tonight, although he had ample evidence that Bhusha was fast asleep, Ganeshvara was still awake. What had stopped him was the sight of the slowly moving line of clouds visible from his window. The clouds surrounded him. They beckoned him: Come and join us. You'll forget

the misery of not being able to sleep. Do you know we are the flip-side of your train. A movement that does not go forward, a sensuous mating without excited pleasure; the young Krishna may not be rash and impetuous, but he is still Krishna all the same, the God of love and life. Don't you see? And yet you'd say no to us? Look, look at that little bird bobbing up and down; how anxiously its eyes dart from the clouds to the telegraph pole, from the telegraph pole to a thin branch, from the branch to the bug that is hidden in the darkness, and from the bug back to the sky. Don't you think it too has fallen under our spell? It'll soon be still; it'll bury its beak under the feathers on its back and dream about us. This passage of languor, unseasonal as it is, is meant for you, only for you. Perhaps it is the end result of a myriad of actions in your past, suffused now with kindness and compassion. But you needn't be afraid. You needn't be afraid of some sudden call to action that will confront you and seize hold of your consciousness.

What did confront him at that moment, what did grab hold of him, was the flesh-and-blood Bhusha, the very embodiment of action! The first thing he did when he woke from his deep sleep was to smile at seeing his grandfather there. As if to say, he's here again? What a strange person, I mean, what a funny friend! Grab him, grab hold of him! Ganeshvara didn't waste a minute; he quickly gathered Bhusha up into the shawl he had wrapped around himself. Bhusha wanted nothing to do with the shawl; he pounced on his grandfather and put his hand right on his chest, grabbing a fistful of white hair. Then, as if to say, 'I'm only trying to scare you, Grandpa,' he let the hair go and buried his face in his grandpa's chest. Gradually, all Ganeshvara could feel was the slight tickling sensation of Bhusha's fingers on his body. Bhusha was wrapped in the shawl; all that could be seen of him was a pair of twinkling eyes, like the beady little eyes of a squirrel peering out from the hollow of a tree. The lesson the clouds had tried to teach Ganeshvara a few moments earlier remained half-finished. He felt the touch of some generous God ripple through his mind; it was a

feeling so expansive, so all-encompassing, that there was no room in it for the pressures of time, although time's effects could still be sensed. The effects of time, its playful sport.

At that moment, no one, not Kiranavala nor Naresh nor Nandini, would have been able to recognize in him the indolence of which they were once so quick to accuse him. And he would have stared back at them in amazement. 'What was that? Whom are you talking about?'

Naresh and Nandini ran most of the way back to the house. The clouds had cleared temporarily, but they couldn't be sure when the next downpour would begin. That gave them no choice but to get home as fast as they possibly could. The first thing they did when they got there was to run in to see Ganeshvara. They intended no disrespect to him, as they stood there with their bubbling smiles and dripping clothes; it was clear from their eyes that tonight, in their moment of joy, they considered the niceties of polite behaviour to be secondary. Tonight, more than anything else what they wanted to show their father was love, not forgiveness, not generous tolerance, but love. May father live for a hundred years. We love him, we love him exactly as he is with his raspy voice, his silences, his doing nothing. Here he stands at the threshold of old age. Let him step over it. Let him grow old. There's nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about now that we are here and the responsibility to do, to win, is ours.

This time, Nandini, who was usually a step ahead of him, didn't get the chance to be first. Naresh could hardly contain his joy as he blurted out, 'Father, everything worked out so well. They're all such decent people. One of them, his name is Pande, was a student with me. That's not the reason why, but they pressed me, they told me, "We want you." Of course, I hadn't exactly committed myself to joining their party, but this is exactly what I ... we (Nandini didn't have to smile quite so smugly) have always wanted ... and of course they won't leave us to starve. They'll make some financial arrangements for us, too. But the important thing is that we have something to do ... something that's worth doing. Do you know what I mean, Father? I mean work in which ...'

When the excited Naresh stopped to take a breath, Nandini jumped in, '... work that will satisfy our souls.'

Two of the family members who made up part of the audience to all this also jumped in as she hesitated slightly. They took this as the opportunity finally to say something for themselves.

First, Bhusha, who all this time had been happily snuggled against his grandfather's body, let out a loud scream. He had been whimpering, stretching his little hands out towards his mother and father, and nobody had paid him the slightest attention. But how could they pretend not to have heard that scream? First things first. At this very minute he was thoroughly miserable. Mother and Father's little Bhusha. Why don't you pick me up? Ganeshvara knew exactly what Bhusha was up to; it could hardly be said that he had paid quite as much attention to Nandini's remarks concerning their souls.

Second, Kiranavala, who could be heard to interject, 'What's all this about work? Here you are, you've been home for an hour already, and look at you. Go, go dry yourselves off and change your clothes. If you get pneumonia, you won't be good for anything at all!'

Time, which goes on forever, has gobbled up more than three years since the beginning of my story. Although Naresh and Nandini hadn't come down with pneumonia, they'd had their share of troubles. Among them, one in particular bears mentioning. One night, as Naresh was coming back on his scooter from the party office (needless to say, both of them had joined the F.P. Party), he hit a cow that was sleeping in the middle of the road. He broke his arm and his foot and had to spend three months in bed. To his critics, he retorted, 'Never mind all that nonsense about speed limits. The important thing is not the speed of traffic; it's the speed of our country. We have no time to waste. We have to turn bullock carts into jet planes overnight. Otherwise we'll always be behind. Do you see what I mean?' The other thing that happened was that on one occasion Nandini had been forced to suppress all of her finest female traits and give a co-worker a good slap in the face; he'd had the temerity to call the distinguished party

leader Ramashankara Chaudhury lily-livered! Somehow, through the efforts of their friend Pande, the fire was put out; if it hadn't, things might have escalated to the point where no one could have predicted where it would end. But for a whole month after that Nandini was on edge; she would slap Bhusha for no good reason, and from time to time even Ganeshvara would smart from the sparks of her anger. One day he couldn't help himself; he blurted out, 'Didn't I warn you not to join any party? That they'd never let you live in peace?' Of course, no one remembered him warning anyone about anything. But that didn't matter. Naresh and Nandini were quick to join hands and let him hear, loud and clear, the sounds of youth's clarion call. Here's the essence of what they had to say:

'Father, we weren't born in this world to live in peace. Even if we fall down, we have to get up again; even if there is blood dripping from our wounds, we still have to run. We have to fight. If we don't, how will this country ever make progress? But you don't have to worry. (You can live in peace. May God give you everything you need.) We know what's best for us. We'll look after ourselves. Please ...'

You might think that there's no point in asking if Ganeshvara had changed in these three years. So what if he had lost a few of his grey hairs and gained a few more wrinkles; so what if the skin on his round and full cheeks now drooped a little more and his voice had grown even more raspy? There really was no need to keep a close account of these things. And to tell you the truth, how would anyone have noticed a change in his behaviour even if it had happened? What I mean is, well, Ganeshvara had always been opposed to moving too fast; in Ganeshvara you wouldn't have expected vague symptoms suddenly to turn into a fatal illness overnight. Increase, decrease, whatever it was, change was always slow, very, very slow in the case of Ganeshvara. Who had the time and patience to sit there and watch for it? Hadn't he always smiled to himself as he strolled aimlessly in the garden—sometimes at the sight of a tiny cabbage peeking its head out of a forest of leaves as broad as winnowing fans; sometimes at the sight of

a ripe tomato, its cheeks puffed up with juice, that seemed to plead with him, 'Pick me, please pick me'; sometimes at the sight of the neighbourhood cats, the way they would sit there motionless, watching a sparrow about to swoop down on a bug, imitating the bird's cry with their own mewing as if they could fool the bird in that way and catch it off guard? Hadn't he always been distressed when he saw needless destruction? He never minded if the monkeys helped themselves to a few cauliflowers or eggplants, but hadn't he always been upset to see them eat a few bites and then fling the rest away? Hadn't he always hated to see them destroy the saplings, pulling them out by the roots? Whenever he saw such things, hadn't he always sat for a few minutes, frowning, fuming silently, and then, as if searching for some answer, looked away from the garden into the sky? But in the end at least Kiranavala should have noticed (even if she hadn't forgiven him for sleeping in a separate bed all these years) how in his sleep he seemed more helpless than before; he seemed to be searching for something that eluded his grasp; there was something in the way his right hand reached for the pillow and stroked it ... in place of Bhusha, who was now no longer next to him. He had grown up. There was no question any longer of singing 'Fly away little birdie' to put him to sleep. Of course, occasionally Bhusha seemed to find it amusing to come and ask his grandfather, 'Grandpa, I'm going to sleep with you tonight. You'll sing "Fly away birdie" for me, okay?' And the scene from the past would repeat itself. For Bhusha it was all a joke. But Ganeshvara would often stop singing midway; it is not an exaggeration to say that he looked pained, as if he were about to break into tears.

Either Kiranavala never saw these things or she chose not to see them. Occasionally, mother and son might share their concern. 'Do you know, nowadays he doesn't even bother to read the newspaper properly. He quickly glances at it for a minute and then flings it aside. And if I ask, all he says is, "There's nothing in it. Everything's always the same. Some sordid story of lust or some terrifying account of violence. All the same, whether it's about you or me or the country."

And then, occasionally, something possesses him and he'll ask, "Say, what's Naru up to these days?"' At that, mother and son wouldn't be able to contain their laughter; even the pity they felt for the old man couldn't stop them.

One morning, bright and early, Naresh announced with all due solemnity, 'I'm going to stand for the next election as the F.P. Party candidate. Pande has promised me. Well ... does anyone have any objection?'

It's hard to know exactly what Bhusha understood of all this, but he clapped in reply. Nandini, standing off to the side, flashed a sparkling and smug smile, as if to say, 'I'm the one who's cooked up this treat for you.' Kiranavala grinned from ear to ear. One would have to say that her smile seemed a bit excessive, maybe even a bit forced. And Ganeshvara, despite his muttered, 'Fine, fine,' couldn't take his eyes off his son's face for a long time. It was as if he was seeing his son in a new light or he needed time to search his memories for something in his son's childhood that could explain today's announcement.

The only thing you could say about the next three days is that they were like a three-ring circus. Party workers of every description, of every colour, age, and dress, came and went without stop. At one point the discussion grew heated and a group left and stood outside. Kiranavala carefully pointed a finger at one of them and whispered to her husband, 'That's Pande. Naru told me, "If our party wins, don't be surprised if he becomes chief minister."' Unfortunately, Ganeshvara couldn't quite make him out. But he could see the excited hand-waving and gesticulating of the other party leaders and hoped that they'd keep their displays of enthusiasm outside the house. Even the chief minister has to have a father, and fathers need some space. It was also a good thing that he had no way of guessing the reason for the fresh bruises that could be seen on his daughter-in-law's cheek and lip. If he had, he would have known just how out of control his son's feverish anger and excitement had grown and he would have been even more worried.

On the evening of the fourth day (it was a particularly beautiful sunset; there were small clumps of reddish clouds in the sky, looking like so many plump sweetmeats on a tray, while down on earth it was hard even to count the black bunches of eggplants in their gentle swaying), Naresh stormed into the house and began screaming. There was no more excitement in his voice, only rage.

'They didn't give it to me. That's fine with me. I don't care, I'll fight. They don't know Naresh Varma! I'll stand as an independent candidate. Do you hear me, Nandini?'

Kiranavala was the first to break the lengthening silence. She dared to ask, 'How could that have happened?'

'It was that bastard Pande. He's behind everything!'

From that time on 'Bastard Pande' became a powerful mantra for Naresh and his supporters. It goes without saying that Naresh's decision to stand as an independent candidate was proof of his courage, if nothing more. But at times his family and his co-workers couldn't help feeling discouraged. They couldn't help feeling that Naresh Varma's popular scooter, with the flag draped from the handles bearing his insignia, a picture of an engine belching smoke, was nothing more than an empty symbol of that courage, a sorry match for the impressive procession organized by the F.P. Party and the B.N. Party, the Broad-based National Party, with its real noise and smoke, with loudspeakers blaring from the backs of a fleet of trucks and jeeps. It wouldn't work. It was clear who would win, and we'll have just made fools of ourselves. But whenever anyone uttered the words 'Bastard Pande', everyone would feel a new surge of strength ripple through their minds and bodies. Naresh would raise his fist and shout, 'The important thing is the principle! The principle! It's not about winning or losing. The bastard.' The others would join in. Even Bhusha intoned, 'Bas-tard, bas-tard,' as if keeping the beat. The grown-ups couldn't stop laughing until he had finally given up. Even Ganeshvara began to say the word to himself, but he stopped at the thought that he was just being a copycat. Somewhat inappropriately, he broke out into a private smile.

No one could possibly have known that in his own mind Ganeshvara was firmly convinced that his son would lose. He might even lose all the money he had put up. That would be still better. At least then his son would be forced to give up this whole messy business. I can get him interested in photography again; he used to love that when he was a child. I'll tell him, open a shop. I'll give him all the money I have saved in the bank. Do I have so many children that ...

It was the night before the election. Ganeshvara woke up in the middle of the night. He felt that an ocean was advancing towards him from every side. And then he realized; it was not an ocean. It was a noisy crowd of people. He still wouldn't have got out of bed; these days a ruckus in the house wasn't unusual long into the night. But when he heard Nandini's cries, 'No. No. It can't be,' and the way they trailed off into a loud wail, when he heard Bhusha burst out sobbing the way he used to as a baby, he couldn't stay in bed any longer. He got up and joined them. 'What's happened, what's happened?' he kept asking.

No one answered him. Not a word came from Kiranavala's mouth. She kept looking from one to the other while tears rolled from her eyes. Bhusha hid his own tear-stained face in a corner of his mother's blouse and rubbed his closed eyes. Nandini was moaning and screaming, 'Take me to him.' Everyone else was talking, all at once, so it wasn't clear what anyone was saying. There was one person in the crowd who couldn't seem to stand still; he went from one to the next, patting everyone on the back. He didn't even leave out Ganeshvara.

Ganeshvara finally learned that someone had beaten his son senseless and left him lying in a pool of blood on the roadside. No. Surely they must have taken him to a hospital. The flag with his symbol, the little train engine, was lying beside the body. Was he bleeding? How much was he bleeding? No one would give him a straight answer.

I can't cry. I am so angry that I could burst. No tears for me. He let them see the extent of his anger when he raised his deep voice and shouted as loudly as he could.

'Tell me. Which party did this to him? Had he taken votes away from them? Was he really going to win? What bastard ...' This was probably the first time anyone had heard the word *bastard* pass Ganeshvara's lips.

In the midst of all this anger and crying someone laughed. 'Uncle, it's not that anyone wanted to kill Naresh Varma. They just wanted one of the candidates to die. That would have stopped the election. Their party would win the next time.'

Ganeshvara couldn't take his eyes off the fellow. It just wouldn't sink in. My god, what is he trying to say? That they'd kill my son for nothing?

All the way to the hospital he didn't ask another question. He sat there in silence, as if he felt it was no use to ask them anything. In the meantime, he was going over in his mind what he would say to his son.

The hospital assured them that the patient would survive. But there was only a trace of a smile on Ganeshvara's lips; it was as if he didn't have any faith in what they said. Only a father really knows what will make his son well.

He stood at a distance from the bed. His son was lying there with his eyes closed. He was the last one to enter; they had followed the rules, letting one visitor in at a time, and now he was the last. He put his hand on his son's body. Swept by emotion, he began to open his lips. Slowly, very slowly, he began to raise and lower his hands. As if he were reciting the verse 'Fly away little birdie ...'

It was lucky that the others weren't there to see him. They would have dragged him out of the room and not let him near his son again until he had come to his senses.

The Idol

1

Hmm . . . I know, I know. You stand in that classic pose with the graceful three bends to your body. Your head bends in one direction, your upper body in the opposite direction, while your lower torso gently echoes the angle of the head. Charming. And there's your alluring flute with the promise of its haunting sounds. I like your hair, too, piled gingerly on top of your head. And your dark body, but above all, above all, it always comes down to your enticing sweet smile. A smile that seems to say that the secret of life and death is Romance, pure and simple, Romance that is known to you alone and perhaps to those who come to you. Before they are captivated by your charm and can swoon with pleasure, they are burned by the fires of their own passion; that's how they find out. What choice did the poor wives of the cowherds have, faced with the power of the spell you cast? They abandoned everything—husbands, children, home—to follow the sound of your flute. That's what the sacred books tell us, at least. No matter. The hint of a smile that plays on your lips is never extinguished; it goes on provoking, teasing, tempting the poor and the unfortunate. As if to say, 'What, aren't you coming? Can you bear not to come?' Ah! There must be limits, even to cruelty. But Krishna, oh dark one, don't forget. Don't forget that I am not one of those poor or unfortunates. You might think that I need your pity; after all, I was born with an incurable disease. I'm always alone. I've never been able to call anyone my own. Not my mother and father, not my husband, not even my children, to say nothing of the rest of the world. Maybe you think that my life will be even more pathetic now, now that I'm a widow and my only child is grown; she's the mother of two children herself. All the people I might have called my friends have gone away. And I'm not as strong or as young as I once was. I don't

even find pleasure any more in sitting by myself and drawing or singing. So what is Madam Suruchi to do? Where is she to go? Do you think that all she can do is to call out to you over her tears, 'Take me to you! Let me dissolve in the darkness of your glistening black body?'

Well, you are wrong. Dead wrong. Suruchi will never think of herself as helpless. Never. Her being alone is not some congenital disease; it is her innate strength, her pride. Do you really want to know why I come to you every morning and evening, come to you and talk to you like this?

It's fun, that's why. It amuses me to joke with you like this. To pretend that your giant lie is the truth. To tease you, to tempt you .... Don't be silly. If I didn't joust with you like this, whom would I tease? Did I ever hear you say that anyone in this world was real, that any reality in this world wasn't ugly? Tell me, who else would appreciate my sense of humour, my love for joking like this? So, Krishna, my dark lord, come to me. Come, come. Aren't you coming? Can you afford, not to come?

You'll have to forgive me. I can't just abandon my home and family, I mean my individuality, to merge myself completely in you the way the sacred songs say those women in the village of the cowherds did. I am not that stupid, that naive. But I can play this game with you for a few minutes every morning, for a few minutes every evening. Surely you don't object?

It was in this way that Suruchi Mohanty spoke to the image of Lord Krishna. The image, about two feet in height, seemed to sparkle with life. It had been brought some time ago for her late husband, Ashvinibabu, who was then serving as the chief forest inspector. Her words betrayed a sense of intimacy that she could express only like this, in secret. Earlier, she'd had a tiny image of Krishna as a child, crawling playfully on the ground. Suruchi was convinced that he would never be able to understand her coded message of love. That was why she had asked her husband to bring this image of Lord Krishna as the cowherd, lover of the women in the village of

cowherds, all the way from the sacred site of Vrindavan itself. Oh, how she troubled her husband's private secretary—what was his name? Some stupid name—to make sure that he got the right image. Suruchi felt like laughing when she remembered how many images she had rejected, one after the other. How plaintively she had said, 'No, no, this isn't the one I want. Lord Krishna isn't supposed to grin like a fool, is he? No, no, Krishna's black, I know, but black like this, like some pot covered in soot?' Suruchi had no way of knowing that when she rained down her sarcasm, her husband's private secretary would flee from her, not knowing what to do next. Plucking up his courage, he would decide to phone some agent in Delhi, so that somehow, someway, by hook or by crook, he would find the right Lord Krishna for his boss's wife, one that would finally, at last, meet with her approval. Though disgusted by the silliness of the task, his mind had been plagued by one thought: 'Are you so useless that you can't even fulfil the desire of a pretty woman? Why phone someone in Delhi? Why don't you just go yourself, straight to the place where they make the images of Lord Krishna? Oh, why do women like her have to be so pretty in the first place?'

In one way or another, the right image of Lord Krishna was found. It was perfect; there was nothing about it that Suruchi could criticize. She put the image of the crawling child Krishna in one corner, from which it stared at her with bright twinkling eyes, as if it had been caught red-handed in one of its more famous childish pranks. But Suruchi had no time to play with the child Krishna. She would sprinkle some scented water over the image and then rush back to her Lord Krishna. He was alive and vigorous, a handsome youth. And she was ready to spar with him over jokes, cleverness, and tender love.

From time to time, flickers of doubt would cross Suruchi's mind. It would seem to her that Lord Krishna wasn't just playing a casual game of love; he was dead serious. He wanted something more; he wanted total surrender, a mad, crazed love in which the mind danced

furiously and wildly. It was as if he were saying to her, 'I'll show you. I'm not a mere mortal. I'm God. Don't you know?'

Suruchi's response was to laugh back at him. 'So you think you're God, do you? I made you. You're my Krishna, the Krishna I made. You can't frighten me. Besides, I'm not that stupid or naive. I know myself. There's nothing about me that's got any taint of sin, any hint of wrongdoing. I always say exactly what's what. Exactly like it is. I've never deceived anyone, not my husband, not my daughter, not anyone on this earth. What is it, then, that you'll show me? What is it that you'll lay bare? I'll keep you locked up in my love forever, as tightly locked up as a prisoner in the dark hold of a ship. And you'll play by my rules, my laws. Do you hear me?'

But she still felt a gnawing sense of unease. She couldn't help thinking that her husband's private secretary had outdone himself. It was one thing for an image to be lifelike, but did it have to be so unbridled and insolent, too? Wouldn't it have been better if Lord Krishna's glance had something slightly gentler in it, if his smile had been slightly more tender?

Today was one of those uneasy times. But she paid no attention to her feelings and went about her business, lighting the two lamps, worshipping in her own idiosyncratic way.

When she had finished with her worship she went out to the balcony and sat down. She thought she would stretch out on her usual easy chair and pick up the detective novel she had been reading. She yelled to the cook to bring her something to eat. She would show herself and her Lord Krishna that for today at least their game of love was over. At least until evening, anyway.

2

'I'm not going to school.'

'Don't go. See if I care.'

Sukanya scowled at her son and shouted, 'Bonny. Enough!'

She knew she would never get to finish what she had started to say. Bonny and Rini went right on fighting.

'You bastard.'

'Do you know what the word *bastard* means? Shall I tell Mother what you just said?'

'Go ahead and tell her. As if she comes running to hear everything you say.'

But Sukanya had heard. And with each angry word, each more angry than the previous, she wished she could somehow disappear and make her son and daughter disappear. One would yell, 'Drop dead!' and the other would shout, 'Bastard!' How was their mother supposed to ignore them? Fine. She wouldn't hear. Get out of here, both of you. Who cares where you go? Just get out of my sight. Sukanya couldn't make up her mind whether she should pick herself up and march out of the room or stay and tell them a thing or two. All she was sure of was that she'd had enough. She couldn't take any more of living in this house with the constant flood of anger. Now when Bonny looked over at her, hoping to enlist her on his side, it was no longer anger that he saw on her face. It was sheer misery that had left its mark there. Her once soft and fair complexion was marred by the taut lines that had formed on her forehead. Swollen eyes stared at the ground, while her lips were closed tightly in a grimace that stretched right across her face.

Bonny looked away, as if he hadn't time now to feel sorry for anyone. Mother had no guts. Just like a woman.

But little Rini kept staring at her mother, as if throwing her a challenge. I'll say what I want. I'll say just whatever I want. He can't get away with telling me to drop dead, with dragging me out of bed by my hair. So what if he's my elder brother? While she was staring like this at her mother, she must have noticed ... noticed that something was wrong. And so she didn't say another word. She picked up her school bag and slung it over her shoulder. She let her know that she was going to school. She was going to school, all right. Bonny didn't scare her.

Bonny and Rini left for school. Sukanya didn't budge. She sat right where she had been sitting. She watched them, busying themselves with their own things. She watched them, and she saw that today they didn't even bother to say goodbye to her. Who was Mother anyway? No one important. Some useless thing. That's what her foolish children thought.

Children began to emerge from the other houses, some from bigger houses, some from the smaller, more modest quarters. Some would get into rickshaws, some would board the school bus, and others would walk. Sukanya watched them and imagined that all their mothers had seen them off and were standing at their front doors, smiling and saying goodbye. Maybe one of the mothers was even giving her son some last words of advice, shaking her hand, telling him, 'Do this. Don't do that.' She was sure no mother was just sitting like she was, overwhelmed with exhaustion.

I have no strength. What good is it to be an adult? What good is it to be attractive? Who robbed me of my vitality? Who ...?

To Sukanya, it seemed that before she could complete her accusation the guilty ones had appeared, one after the other, to offer some words in their own defence. There was Dr Vishavala, muttering, 'I didn't take anything from you. Take something? Why, I gave you something, I gave you all sorts of tonics so that you wouldn't be upset. And I told you, sometimes with a subtle hint and sometimes in so many words (Mrs Mahapatra, forgive me, but you look more and more like my favourite movie star) that even if whatever ailed you wasn't gone, it certainly wasn't affecting your looks. I also clearly told you and Mr Mahapatra that you needed a change of scenery, a break from all the household chores. A few days alone, where you could do something you wanted, something artistic, perhaps.' Sukanya laughed to herself. Where did you ever get the idea that I am artistic? From my thin and graceful fingers? From the way I speak? Or maybe it was my famous abstracted look, the way I always seem to be gazing into space, at nothing in particular. The one who had made that look of hers so famous—her engineer husband who had seen in it the first

and last wisp of poetry in his life—also appeared before her now. My husband, Mr Manamohan Mahapatra, a metallurgist. There he is, standing there, feeling sorry for me, not saying a word. Feeling sorry for me because I am so soft-hearted that I can't stand even the slightest bit of shouting, sickness or unhappiness, any sort of commotion at all. Otherwise, would I have got angry at him, like today, for no good reason at all? Just because he was upset that his books and papers were in a jumble, did I have to turn on him like that? Did I have to yell at him, 'Why don't you ever pay attention to Bonny and Rini?' He said, 'I see your abstracted look, the tender heart that beats behind your soft breasts; I know exactly what they're like, how they feel.' (How vulgar can you be!) I mean, that is what he would have said if he could have put his inner thoughts into audible words. He would have said, 'That's why I offer to you my silence, my patience, my forbearance. I'm not just your husband, you know. I'm your elder brother, your father …' No, no, no one can be anything like my father. If he were alive, he would feel sorry for me. He would feel sorry for me because he would know that I wasn't made for doing housework like this. He used to say that everything about me was perfect, that I'd made a place within me for everything that was best, that was why he had given me the name Sukanya, 'Perfect Daughter'. He would say that a woman like me should study one of the arts, though he couldn't decide which one—painting, dance, or singing. If he hadn't become ill, I wouldn't have studied a worthless subject like history, done my BA, and married as soon as I had turned twenty. No, no. No matter how much you love me, it wouldn't be like my father.

He was the only person in the world who could understand what made me the way I am and why I can't stand to live with you like this and will never be able to stand it. Sorry!

Sukanya took every ounce of affection and sympathy she had received from other men and let it trickle drop by drop into the hand of her dead father Ashvini Mohanty. She would say, 'Take it. It really belongs to you. Other people just borrow or steal it from you. You

take it and make me your little girl again. A little girl of seven, who'll jump into your lap and pretend to feed you betel. You'll pretend to chew it, you'll twist your tiger's moustache and shake your head from side to side as if something had tickled you. I'll laugh and laugh. There'll be no one there to remind us of how much time has passed, no one there even to know.'

(Something interrupted her reverie. She thought she heard the loud sound of someone's footsteps. Anyway, she was back in the reality of the waking world.)

I knew it. I knew you would come. I knew you would come and stand before me, right before me, like some sentinel sent by Time. And glare at the two of us with a domineering look. You wouldn't say a word, but you'd take me from Father's lap. Just so I'd be sure to understand that there was still homework to do, oh yes, there was all kinds of work to do. That was why you made me get up. Do you think I don't know? That I didn't know? I knew. You couldn't stand it.

Okay, okay, I'll tell you. I'll tell you a hundred times if I must. Think whatever you will. So what if you are my mother? You're consumed with jealousy. It was you who made me this way. You destroyed my inner strength. You set your two huge eyes on me and whether it was with words or just the way you acted you let me know everything. You told me that I wasn't really the object of anyone's affection; I just imagined I was. You told me that I was a fake, that I put on airs and was a big phoney, not the delicate creature I pretended to be. You let me know that you thought I acted weak on purpose, to lure men who were attracted by a helpless woman.

Sukanya didn't flinch as she stared down the prisoner, her mother, whom she had put in the witness box. She stared so hard and with such determination that she didn't even notice the smile her husband gave her as he came in from his morning jog, dripping with sweat. She didn't even show any sign of recognizing the servant, Dharmu, who had returned from the bazaar and wanted to ask her something. It was as though she felt that if she let go of any of that stubborn determination, she would collapse.

But try as Sukanya might, she lost her concentration. Just as she always did. And her eyes filled with large, round tears.

Her mother, the prisoner in the box, seized the chance and fled. Her wicked mother, who knew everything. Judge and jury and her father's wife, all in one.

She won't come to me, I know. She'll stay there, far away from me, with her beloved Lord Krishna. Even the tears that roll from my eyes won't move her. But she can still taunt me, 'Tsk, tsk. Look at you, a grown woman, the mother of two children. And you still haven't given up your old airs? Are your mother and father still here to watch you put on your show?' Her old-lady's smile (and what was she now if not an old lady?) seemed even crueller than before.

Mother, you are a jealous old witch! I'm going to say it, I'll say it a thousand times over. And why not? I may have put on weight, but I'm still prettier than you, still better than you. That's why Father loved me more, loved me much, much more ...

Sukanya was beyond help. She pushed her husband's hand aside. She told Dharmu to get out. She didn't even bother to wipe away the tears with the corner of her sari or the handkerchief her husband offered. Why should I wipe them away? Does anyone care about me any more?

A few days after this incident, Sukanya sat watching the sky on a quiet evening. Her husband hadn't returned from his game of tennis. Bonny and Rini had gone to a birthday party and wouldn't be home until much later. Dharmu had gone somewhere; he hadn't even bothered to ask her permission. That convinced her that no one in the house cared what she thought, from her children right on down to .... 'So what,' she said. 'I don't care!'

Reshma was tied up inside the house. It was time to take her out. But she told her, 'Go ahead and bark. I don't care. The dog isn't my private possession or my sole responsibility, either. It's theirs, too.'

With this, Sukanya cut herself off from her family, from her surroundings, and stared at the sky. She was about to come to an

unusual decision. She watched the splendour of the sky, how the clouds came together and then floated apart; how something peeked out from between them. No, that wasn't what she was watching, either. She was looking beyond all of that, reaching out as if to touch her new decision; no, not just to touch it, but to seize it firmly in her hand.

For she had come to the decision that she would write her mother a letter. Not her usual letter, nor a letter filled with anger and resentment. She would simply write, 'Come to me. Come and stay with me for a month or two. After all, you should come and stay with me. You are my mother. I am your only daughter. You didn't have six children or nine children. Just one. I'm the only one ...'

(A hideous sight floated before Sukanya's eyes but she quickly brushed it aside. Her mother was lying down, and her only child was grasping her breasts in her two hands, unsure of which one to drain first ... buried in her mother's flesh ... her sweat ...)

You got me married. Father died. That was that. And now you want to stay in our home by the river, alone there, like a queen. You'll take care of your cat and play your game of love with your Lord Krishna every morning and evening. No way. I don't care if you love me or not. I'm still your daughter. Don't you think you have some responsibility towards me? I'm not well in mind or in body. Don't you think you should do something for me?

Over and over again, Sukanya made up her mind that she would write the letter. A strong letter, so strong that her mother wouldn't be able to accept the invitation just to keep up appearances and then flee in a day or two. She won't be able to come here like some guest. She'll have to come and stay like a real mother, for one month, or maybe even two. I'll treat her with all the respect due a mother ... and ... and ... I'll finally really talk to her so that she understands where I'm coming from. Even if it unleashes a storm, I'll settle this once and for all!

I'll satisfy my longing for revenge. Not just any old longing. A longing for revenge.

Sukanya had arrived at the pinnacle of her decision. She breathed a sigh of relief. As she was about to imagine the impending storm with her mother, she stopped herself. Wait. First let her come. Given Sukanya's state of mind, it was no wonder that as she stared at the sky she didn't notice the real black clouds gathering in preparation for a different kind of storm.

It wasn't as if the storm would have changed her mind. Not at all. Sukanya didn't care about clouds or rain for that matter. But, unfortunately, just at that moment lightning struck. A bright flash of lightning that went from one end of the sky to the other. A streak of fire. Sukanya screamed.

Everyone knows I'm terrified of lightning. Isn't anyone home?

After she had fled into the safety of the house, Sukanya threw herself on her bed. She could see how dishevelled she was in the long mirror of her dressing table. And she couldn't help thinking that no one would have considered her swollen face and dark eyes beautiful.

3

It had been fifteen days since she had come to stay with her daughter. Suruchi didn't even mention going back to her home on the banks of the river, beyond the feeble protests she thought politeness required of her. 'When are you going to let me go?' she had asked, and her daughter had replied with a sweet smile, 'Never. I'll never let you go.' Suruchi could only look again at her daughter with a touch of astonishment in her gaze and then smile back. Anyone would have thought that one of the two had had a radical change of heart; what other explanation could there be for this unprecedented show of affection between them?

If you really wanted to know who had changed and how much, you'd have to go back to that night of the lightning, I mean to that night, late at night, after the lightning had exploded in the sky and then quietened down and Sukanya had written the letter to her mother. It was then that she had put her decision into action. You would have

to say that the speed and determination with which she had acted were not typical of her. It was almost as if she wanted to write as quickly as possible, to make sure that her mother would arrive before lightning struck again. There was one line in the letter, one terrible line, that betrayed her agitation. Her anger, her outrage, her fury, nothing could stop her. The words just came tumbling out: 'This time you can't come and then run away. You have to stay with me for a long time. If you don't, I'll know you don't love me.'

It was not quite fair to say that she used the words as a weapon.

Nor is it true that when Suruchi read the lines she was unduly moved. There's no question that she had nothing but contempt for displays of emotion and considered them a means of deception. Nor could you say that she had entirely forgotten her daughter's affectations and airs. But in her wildest dreams she could not have imagined that after all this time her middle-aged daughter (she was thirty; if that wasn't middle age, what was?) would write like this to her mother. Particularly after the way she had been so quiet after her father died; she had never even written, why, she didn't even remember to send me a card for my birthday. I thought that she had decided to keep her distance. Pathetic! She's not just affected. She's silly. Do you think love is like a piece of candy, that if you nag me enough I'll open the box and give you some? And you'll just plunk it in your mouth and savour its sweetness?

The feeling she had for this affected, silly daughter was something akin to pity, if that is what you can call the mixture of compassion and smugness that a thin barren tree, still standing, might summon for some ordinary green weed in the prime of its life. Had Sukanya, as her daughter, ever been able to insist on more from her than that? Who knows!

This comparison with the tree was not made idly, as Suruchi well knew.

The breeze blowing from the banks of the river reminded those who lived there how lucky they were to have left the commotion of

the city behind and built their homes here. It was even possible that as the sun set and their restless children looked at the boats on the river, they turned into poets or painters, even if it was just for a moment. But who would have been moved by the sight of the barren leafless trees on the river bank? Only Suruchi Mohanty. She couldn't help congratulating whoever had put them there, and rejoicing in their existence. To her, they seemed like the perfect symbol of her own self. To her, a leafless tree seemed like an aging woman who has no more ties or attachments, no one she needs to care for any more; the tree was no longer buried under a chaotic jumble of noisily rustling leaves, like someone overwhelmed by the silly demands of a thousand trivial events; it didn't cry any more, shedding its teardrops of dripping dew. The tree seemed to have nothing to do with the others near it, the ones with all those leaves; it didn't even seem to be of the same species; it just stood there in all its solitary splendour, complete unto itself. See how it stands there, look at its power and endurance; in it she seemed to see the reflection of her own healthy body and strong mind.

In any case, after Suruchi read the letter she was prepared to go to her daughter's house in the other city; the house that offered no river or canal, that was one of a government colony of similar houses. But that night she asked her Lord Krishna, 'Okay, can you tell me, why is my daughter so weak, so unhappy with her life? Why hasn't she figured out that she has to stand on her own two feet, that she has to find her own candies to eat? Didn't she inherit anything of her mother's nature?' Suruchi wasn't exactly pleased by the way Lord Krishna just smiled at her in reply. As if to say, 'Why ask me? Don't you know?'

Besides that, she seemed to see in Lord Krishna's look a sudden flash of restless longing. 'What's that all about? Don't tell me you're itching to go away somewhere? Or that you have some business with my daughter?'

Just because a mother comes to stay with her daughter after a lapse of several years and for two weeks or so is perfectly content, it doesn't necessarily imply that either of them has changed. It is probably

true that there was some more tenderness in the way Suruchi spoke and acted. But it seemed that it was really Bonny and Rini who responded to that new softness and greedily kept it all for themselves. Except for the hours when they were in school, they wouldn't let their grandmother out of their sight. The grandmother of course insisted from the start that she wasn't a typical grandmother; she didn't even have any good stories to tell them. But she still had to listen to an endless stream of jokes, had to laugh at each one. She still had to play one game after another and lose most of them. She still had to admit that she was dumb, and she still had to paint picture after picture and make each of the pictures she did for Bonny as pretty as those she did for Rini (otherwise, the two of them would fight, of course) and in the process got a good sore back.

Throughout these two weeks, however, the battle trumpets were beginning to sound, though no one could hear them yet, and military banners were beginning to unfurl, though no one could see them yet. But neither could they be ignored entirely; they would have to be given their due respect.

At first, Suruchi thought that her daughter had had a fight with her husband or her children or maybe even the cook and wanted to complain about the offender to her mother. Well, in that case, what was she waiting for? Who was stopping her? But that's not all. She throws such accusing glances at me, her mother, as if to say that I'm responsible for all her troubles. Suruchi had no way of knowing that all that time Sukanya was thinking, 'Now I'll tell you. I'll tell you, now that you seem so solicitous about my life; otherwise, I'll lose my chance. I'll fall into your web. Sucked in by your great "grandma" act. Trapped by my own need to be civil.'

It goes without saying that Sukanya couldn't bring herself to carry out her resolution. There was the blast of a trumpet and the fluttering of a flag, but only for an instant, no more. And then everything was back to normal.

But Suruchi responded to the sporadic blasts of the trumpet and the flag waving with her own attacks. At least, in her mind she did.

She had learned that attack was often the best defence. Whenever her daughter asked her something, she spit the answer back at her.

She'd say, 'My daughter, you've brought all of this on yourself. I didn't do anything to you. Don't look at me like that, like some wounded deer. Of course, I punished you from time to time, but it was always for your own good. Why should you have felt so humiliated or degraded? And when your father used to come back from a trip, before I could even ask him how he was, you were all over him and he was engrossed in you. So what if I told you to stop putting on airs? Did that do you any harm? (Besides, just because I was his wife, do you think I only wanted him in bed, that was all?) And what about the time when we were on a picnic and you stuffed a huge piece of chocolate cake in the hands of some beggar and I said to you, "Don't be such a show-off." I was right. Absolutely right. That was just what I should have said. I knew that was just what you were doing. You were showing off. Trying to pretend that you're so generous. You hadn't forgotten how once, when you did something like that, some aunt or other had turned to your father with a stupid smile and said, "Just like her father. Compassion itself!" As if she had even known your father when he was a child! And then there was the time you wrote some crazy love letter to some poet, Vishnuvrata. I read some of it and tore it up. I teased you, "So my daughter's fallen in love." Couldn't you understand what I was trying to say? Why are you so weak that you'll never feel real love? You'll just fritter yourself away? Maybe the boy was good looking. So what? What will that get you? At least, I made you stop your foolishness, didn't I? Didn't I find you a splendid engineer, so what if he thought he was God's gift to the world .... You have something else to ask me? Go ahead. Go ahead. Ask all you want.

'Don't you know this much? Whatever your mother may be, she's honest if nothing else. She's truthful (more truthful than your father, but you don't need to know about that). She never could stand backbiting or gossip. How could she just let you be as you were, putting on airs, all false show? Forget it. Forget it all. It's all in the past. History.

Now if you were to speak I'd shout it from the rooftops. I'd shout it everywhere. I love my daughter. I love my daughter so much. Will you say something? Will you speak to me?'

In this way, Suruchi began to counter her daughter's unspoken questions, her anger, her fury, her accusations. With all the love she felt, she rained down blow after blow. But gradually she began to be afraid. She sensed that a violent storm was brewing.

But she still had faith that she could weather any storm. Until Rini made that impossible.

They were all sitting around as people do on a rainy day, although there was no hint that the clouds would actually darken and it would rain. Mother and daughter, grandson and granddaughter were sitting around, munching snacks and talking about nothing in particular (when the children were around, serious gossip was out of the question). Rini spoke up.

'It's going to rain today,'

No one paid any attention to her, but she kept on talking. It was as if she were possessed or something.

'Lightning will strike (Sukanya didn't have to look at her daughter like that) ... and Mother will make a big fuss and hide under the bed. Don't you think that's funny?'

At that, Bonny joined in with his own giggles. The children were making quite a fuss by now. Their grandmother told them to be quiet, but she saw that her daughter wasn't saying a word. It was as if she had nothing to say. As if it didn't matter to her whether someone quietened them or not. It was too late. Her childhood wound that had never healed was exposed for everyone to see. Do you see it, Mother? Do you see it?

No! No! There's nothing for me to see. Lightning has nothing to do with fire. But, child, do you really remember it? You couldn't have been more than eighteen months old. How could you possibly remember? The feelings of agitation that seized Suruchi's heart could rightly be called a storm.

You don't remember. There's no way. Not even in your subconscious. There is no such thing. It's all nonsense!

Anyway, what do you think? Do you think I deliberately left you behind in the blazing fire? Could any mother be so stupid? When the fire broke out in the back of the house and everyone was running around in panic, I knew full well that you were sleeping in the room at the front. And I knew that your father, if no one else, surely your father would come running from his office and pick you up and carry you to safety outside. And that is what happened. Whatever gave you the idea that I just left you there in the flames?

Silly, silly girl. If your father hadn't picked you up, do you think I wouldn't have run and grabbed you? Do you think I wouldn't have taken my little girl in my arms and run to safety before the flames could reach her? That I wouldn't have quietened your frightened cries? Don't you know that whatever it took, whatever I had to do, I would have got you out? But when all the others were running to grab the clothing, the cash, and the jewellery, who had time to worry about my Lord Krishna? Who but me cared about Krishna enough to rescue him from the fire? That was why the first thing I did was to run inside, run inside to get Krishna. Was I wrong to do that? Tell me, did I make a mistake?

Suruchi couldn't tell what was going through her daughter's mind as she looked at her pale, impassive face. But for the first time in her life it occurred to her ... maybe, just maybe I was wrong. Maybe it is my fault that she is so afraid of lightning. She wants to remind me that when she was in danger I left her and ran first to a doll, an idol.

It made Suruchi sad to think that she could never make her daughter, or anyone else for that matter, understand that her Krishna wasn't just a doll; it wasn't some lifeless idol. It saddened her, but she had no choice but to come to terms with the painful and tumultuous stirrings of her heart. I admit it. It was my fault. Now it's your turn to tell me. What punishment have you in store for your mother?

Did Sukanya hear her pitiful confession? Did she think that now was the perfect moment?

The clouds had vanished without a trace. That evening when Suruchi went to see her Lord Krishna, there was nothing in the air that made her hesitate in her usual intimate exchange with him. She didn't notice that her daughter had come into the room and was standing behind her. When she had lit the second lamp and was about to conclude her prayers, her daughter asked her something, in the voice a small child uses with a mother.

'Mother, why do you light two lamps? Isn't one enough?'

Suruchi could simply have answered that one was for Krishna and the other was for herself. Whatever she was, devotee or what have you (lover?), she was still someone else. The second lamp was a token of respect for that separateness. She wasn't willing to abandon her individuality and merge into Krishna; she was determined about that. That was the meaning of her second lamp; it had been that way from the very first day she had started to worship Krishna. But for some reason or the other she told a lie. She smiled at her daughter and said, 'You can't figure it out? Do I have six children, nine children, that I should light lamp after lamp? After I light my lamp to Krishna, who else would I pray for but the one child I do have?'

Suruchi's heart melted when she saw how her daughter's face lit up. She was sure that her daughter had never given her such joy, not since the very day she was born. Suruchi told herself that what she had said wasn't really a lie. She had nothing to gain for herself by saying it. On the contrary ... (On the contrary, it was a selfless act. She had never expected that such a thing was part of loving.)

Suruchi noticed that her daughter looked different; not just then, even afterwards she began to look different. No one would have said that she had ever had sorrow in her life or felt sorrow now. Or that she had always needed someone on whom to depend. Suruchi said, 'My daughter is beautiful. Far more beautiful than her mother.'

But her daughter wasn't finished with her yet. A few days later, out of the blue, she asked her mother something. Her words weren't halting, but neither did they tumble out in a mad rush. She asked in a

quiet, controlled, clear manner. The way morning comes, naturally, after the night has ended. She said, 'Mother, I've decided that I would like to begin worshipping God. Your Lord Krishna. I'd like to worship your Lord Krishna. Can you leave him here with me?'

Suruchi was astonished. She looked at her daughter. It was as if she couldn't quite believe that anyone on earth would have such nerve! But the very next moment it seemed to her that someone had brought her to her senses. And that someone was her own daughter, no one else. She's asking you for something ... she's finally punishing you.

All she said was one word. Yes. Fiery hot tears threatened to fill her eyes. She stopped them.

She talked to herself, gave herself courage, and then, finally, as if she had just figured it out, she said, 'Lord Krishna doesn't really belong to me. I even remember the name of that fellow who was your father's personal secretary. Chakadi was his name. Just plain Chakadi. Strange name. Anyway, the Lord Krishna belonged to him.' And she promised herself that she would find something that would be totally her own.

Can you imagine this? Imagine that one day, eventually, she would return to her house on the river to find that someone had chopped down her tall bare tree. Nothing would be left of it but a stump, which they couldn't uproot. No doubt she would have something to say, wouldn't she? She would say, 'This tree wasn't mine anyway. It belonged to the woodcutter.'

COMPASSION

I never paid any attention to what they said. And you can bet that they had plenty to say about why a smart and pretty girl like Chanda would have been willing to marry a drunken lecher like Samarendra, better known as Santu. They had some mighty strange explanations for it, too. Gajen saw me sitting still as a stone. He gave me a bit of a shove and whispered to me, 'Listen. It would have been bad enough had he just been an alcoholic. But he's also a drug addict. His own brother told my brother Ravi, though he clearly found the whole business painful. I heard it with my own ears.' When Jayanta saw the way he was whispering to me, he burst out laughing. 'What's the big deal? Everyone knows about it. You don't live here in the housing colony, the news reaches you late. We've seen it for ourselves, so many times. Haven't we, Batu?'

I didn't like the way he called me Batu. My name wasn't really Batakrishna. But he thought he was being friendly when he called me that as a nickname. He had picked it up from some Bengali film; there was a character in the film named Batakrishna, and he was a romantic, like me. Whatever. I had no choice but to nod yes in response to his question. The truth was that I had been living here in the colony for a long time. Chanda lived in number 6, and we lived in number 7. Santu wasn't that far from us; he lived in number 11. I would have been embarrassed to say that I didn't know the score.

Jayanta went right on, calling on me as his witness. 'Don't you remember what happened that time, the day after Dussehra? Great Santu fell from the roof of a two-storey building; if he hadn't landed on Mr Singh's sand pile, he'd have been crushed to bits. I heard he broke his foot; he said he'd slipped on some moss or something slimy that was growing on the roof. Moss ... my foot! The truth is, he was smoking hash and got dizzy and lost his balance.'

Ramakanta put in his two cents. 'But whatever you say, he's good looking. He and Chanda sure make an attractive couple.'

That led two of the others to pounce on him. 'Just because a person is fair-skinned and tall as a palm tree doesn't mean he's good looking! That guy's eyes look dead, and he walks with a stoop as if he had just been punched in the stomach or something.' There followed a long list of Santu's flaws. His lips were too dark, he had a whiny voice like a girl's, you name it. Enough to let everyone know what they thought of Ramakanta's aesthetic sense.

I couldn't nod my head in agreement. It wasn't that their description was exaggerated. That wasn't it. I just couldn't agree that there was no glow in Santu's eyes. I had seen it before he developed the glazed eyes of the drug addict. It was way back, when he was still in short pants and I had just moved into the housing colony. Jayanta and Gajen and the others hadn't made their appearance on the scene yet, and Santu would sit alone on the fence of the housing colony and watch the sun set. I had seen the pain in his eyes. Who's to say that there's only a glow of pleasure in the eyes and no such thing as a glow of pain? To me, anything that stops you in your tracks deserves to be called a glow. But if they weren't ready to see that, what could I do? I didn't bother to object. I guess that's why they'd all say that I am a Batakrishna, an incurable romantic!

I was fully aware that in today's world to be labelled a romantic means to attract the pity of intelligent society, and maybe even its affection, but to lose its respect. I didn't care. Santu wasn't my friend. In fact, one day he had actually called me a 'bloody bastard'. But I still wasn't prepared to admit that by marrying him Chanda had done something so strange and unusual that whenever any of us stalwart citizens reflected on our past lives in the housing colony (it's true that Gajen hadn't actually lived in the colony, but he'd been one of our friends), all we could do was talk about her marriage, say what a mistake she had made and advance theories—each one crazier than the previous—about why she had done it. You have to believe me when I say that the day I heard they were getting married—it was a

love marriage, of course; Santu was Bengali, and Chanda was Bihari—I wasn't even particularly surprised. You see, I knew that for someone like Chanda doing something that outrageous wasn't out of the question. Not at all. In my excitement, I was about to send them a congratulatory card. I didn't send it. You guessed it: I was afraid I'd get some obscene reply from Santu. There's no question that Santu was going to the dogs; he had pretty much become what people call a 'rotten egg'. But why should that make me deny what I had seen for myself: that in Santu's eyes there had once been pain, deep pain. Why should I reject out of hand the possibility that despite all of Santu's addictions, his pain only grew and grew and that this was what had finally brought him to Chanda's side?

You mustn't think that I had a soft spot for the girl, just because she was so beautiful, and that therefore it didn't matter to me what she did or didn't do. That wasn't it, either. Chanda might have been pretty, but she was all but mute. She never said a word to anyone. She never even gave her neighbours and the people who lived nearby the time of day. I had occasion to go to her house more than once; I had business with her elder brother, Bhanu, a real bookworm, a fat kid who wore glasses and devoured books. I made good use of his economics notes. His deep knowledge of cricket trivia also amused me. I guess I'd often see Chanda walk by Bhanu's room when we were sitting there together. No doubt I'd even lift my eyes from the book I was reading for a split second to take in her beauty. But it would be unfair and totally wrong to infer from this that I gave one hundred per cent approval to either her looks or her behaviour. I may be a romantic, but that doesn't mean I lack the ability to question or discern. Just to prove that to you, let me tell you that when I finally did hear Chanda exchange a few words with her brother, I was fully convinced that she would be better off if she stuck to a stricter vow of silence! Her voice was anything but charming or seductive. It had no music in it, no lilt. It was a raspy, heavy voice, like the voice of a political leader who knows his power's gone.

'Bhanu, dear brother, tell daddy that I've gone out ... I'll be back late. I'm taking Valu.'

'Bhanu, dear brother, the medicine's going to be delivered. You'll remember, won't you?'

'Bhanu, dear brother, it's raining in Delhi. The cricket match has been cancelled.'

That was about it.

Her last words, I suppose, were meant to tease Bhanu, but it didn't seem to me that there was a trace of softness or lightness in the way she said them. The only music about her came from the bell around her companion, the Alsatian, Valu. It was almost as if she was trying to tell people, 'Don't waste your time looking at me. Look at my dog.'

Of course I liked Valu. But I never tried to get to Chanda by calling Valu to me or petting him. That should prove to you that I wasn't the least bit interested in Chanda, not in that way, anyway. Of course, I did say that Chanda was pretty, just like the others (Gajen, Jayanta et al.) did. That was it. Nothing more.

She was pretty, and she had this fancy dog to protect her. You could also add that she was thoroughly pampered, a rich man's kid. I forgot to mention that. Forgive me. I really did forget; I had no intention of hiding anything from you. Actually, Chanda's father, Mr Yudhisthira Prasada, wasn't what you'd normally think of as a rich or particularly important man. He was, after all, like all the other people who lived in the housing colony, just a civil servant. But since he was employed in the supply department, you might say that circumstances catapulted him into an unavoidable position of wealth and importance. That made Chanda a rich man's daughter. So I forgot to say that Chanda was the daughter of a big man.

Please, please, don't stop me. Don't tell me, 'Thanks. I've heard enough about this vulgar young lady of yours, who's anyway headed for a life of disrepute. And I've heard all I want to hear about dogs.' Let me ask you instead, 'Doesn't the compassion of a beautiful girl, even if she is the spoiled daughter of a rich man, count as genuine

compassion? Does that mean she has to have an ulterior motive, something to gain for herself?'

This was really what stood out about Chanda. Her compassion. It wasn't just compassion; it was something more, I'll tell you about that later. It was something you don't see too much of these days. That's why she became the heroine of my tale. (And don't forget that for me what stood out about Santu was his pain.) I've nothing against giving you a full explanation of what I mean by her compassion. Listen. And try to visualize it for yourself in your mind's eye.

A housing colony for government servants in the metropolis of Calcutta. A lovely evening. Manicured lawns. The men have come back from their offices and are on their way to their clubs. They'll play cards or talk softly of the judges above them or the politicians in power; that is, they'll gossip. Some of their wives will even accompany them, leaving behind them a trail of gentle fragrances. Other wives are off to take part in prayer meetings. Their conversation is about other things. The children in the colony, the young men and women, are off in groups to amuse themselves with whatever that amuses them. Only Chanda keeps herself apart. She sits all alone. Actually, it's not quite true to say she's all alone; she always has a dog by her side. Sometimes it stretches out on her lap and she strokes its fur. She hugs it. She tickles it. She turns it over on its back and gently strokes its belly. From time to time, she carefully smears some ointment on its sores or pulls thorns from his paws. Chanda and the dogs.

The dog with her is by no means always her pedigreed dog, Valu. More often than not she's busy with some other dog. It might be another pet from the colony, it might be a dog that just hangs around the colony and lives off scraps people give it, or it might even be some altogether unknown stray. These days they keep Valu in the house to protect its position in the world; Mr Prasada doesn't want it mixing with any of the riff-raff! So now Chanda has to go out without her Valu.

But who could keep Chanda away from dogs entirely? Even if Mr Prasada didn't want to encourage her in her peculiar obsession, he

couldn't make her give it up, either. He had been reduced to making jokes about it. He'd say, 'What do I have to worry about? I don't have to give my daughter much of a dowry. All I have to do is give her half a dozen dogs and a dozen cats. That's it. Finished.'

Yes, there were cats, too. And rabbits and wild sparrows. She kept all kinds of creatures. When I knew her, she had four cats of assorted sizes. Their names were Shobha, Ibha, Ikbala, and Sardar. I heard that most nights Shobha slept in a ball by her side. And Bhanu once told me that Sardar used to bring her little presents: bones, dead mice, and things like that. But the dogs demanded so much of her time; how could she find the time to pay much attention to anything else?

I'm not trying to say that there wasn't some reason to suspect that it was because she was so pretty, and rich to boot, that she deliberately kept herself aloof from others. In other words, that she was trying to show them, 'Look, I don't fit in with you. I'd rather be with these stupid animals than you, any day!' Occasionally, even I thought that maybe in her great show of compassion there lurked some sense of superiority. But every trace of doubt vanished when I realized that the dogs didn't exactly make her jump for joy.

In fact, she was crying for all those creatures.

She wasn't an overemotional type who would cry at the drop of a hat. Tears came to her eyes and pain wrenched her heart when she realized that it was a question of life or death for some living being. In fact, it was often a question of life or death for the dogs in the colony. From time to time, they would all be in danger. It was fair enough to say that terror would then seize all the children who loved the dogs. This was when the news got around that the municipality was sending a troop of its messengers of death to round up the dogs and kill them. Some said that first they poisoned the dogs, killed them and then dragged their bodies to a truck with metal grates over the windows. Others said, no, that wasn't the way it happened. The men from the municipality would catch the dogs by putting a noose around their necks; they would beat them on the head until they were unconscious

and then load them onto the truck. When they regained consciousness you could see them through the grates over the windows. One would be foaming at the mouth; another would be dripping blood from wounds on his head. Still another would be howling in pain. It wouldn't have the energy to cry properly, but neither was it ready to die that easily. Another would look at you pathetically with its white eyes wide open, begging you, 'Won't you please let me go? Can't you save me? You fed me stale bread with your own hands, and I licked your feet so many times, don't you remember?' When she heard these stories from the children, Chanda would break down and cry. Who didn't know that?

But she didn't stop there. She didn't care if her friends laughed at her or if her mother and father yelled at her. She didn't care when they said that if the stray dogs were left alive it would be bad for everyone. She didn't care about any of that. She went from house to house and whispered orders to each child: 'Each of you has to take charge of one of the dogs. There's Kalu with the tip of its tail cut off; there's Dhedhi with the swollen teats; there's Johnnie Walker, known as Johnnie, who always seems to stagger; there's one-eyed Mamu, Gabbarsingh, and the others. You've got to get them and bring them into your own yards. If you can find something to tie around their necks for a collar, that's even better. Keep an eye on them. If the dog catchers come, tell them, "Get out of here. This is our dog. This is our pet dog." Your parents won't dare say you're lying. If they do, start crying. Real loud. Do you understand me?'

Chanda's ploy worked that time. Only Munna failed to do her job; either she forgot one-eyed Mamu's name or she couldn't cry loud enough, I'm not sure. And so one-eyed Mamu met its death. But the others were saved, don't forget!

The sad thing was that the next time the city was more successful in its operation. Not that all the dogs fell into their clutches, but no one could save poor, pathetic Mini, the one that no one wanted near them anyway. It was as if the powers that be were just waiting for the chance to beat her down, to erase her from the face of this earth.

What a name for a dog: Mini! You're probably surprised to hear that she met such a terrible end when someone had once given her the kind of name you would be more likely to give a favourite child. And you should be surprised. But not just on account of her name. What was in fact so surprising was that, although Mini had been born a dog, she had been cute, she had been sweet, and she had been showered with love and tender care. More than any dog I had ever seen. She had a white, silky coat, a tiny shiny nose like a black bean, and lively green eyes. She had a way of looking up at you with an innocent look, as if she didn't know a thing in the world. And her little tail wagged eagerly. Who wouldn't have fallen in love with her? Probably no child had ever loved a dog the way Mr Ghosh's youngest son had loved Mini. How he played with her! He wrestled and tousled with her; he whispered things into her ear, as if he were telling her his most intimate secrets; he pressed his face up against hers and nuzzled against her. Not even Chanda had ever been so close to a dog. Chanda was filled with compassion for the dogs, but to the young Ghosh the dog was a friend the like of which he had never had before and never would have again. He might not have been able to bring himself to sit and pick ticks off the dog, but he hugged the animal so tightly that the ticks probably jumped right onto him! He had begged and begged his father and brought Mini home from the house of some uncle. Mini was still a puppy then, drinking her mother's milk. From the very first day, he called her his little itsy-bitsy puppy. He shoved all his elephants and horses and train engines and what have you under his bed and lay down on top of the bed. He put Mini on his chest and looked her right in the eyes and promised, 'I'll never let you go. Never ever. Do you know that?'

But one day that same little boy screamed 'Get out!' and threw Mini out onto the street. He slammed the door on her face and warned everyone in the house never to let her inside again. Never mind milk or rice; he forbade anyone to give her even a dried bread crust. He shouted, 'Mini is dead. Dead. Dead!'

If Mini had died as a result of her little master's curse, my tale would end right here. But that was not what God had in mind.

Mini became one of the strays. She was a timid one; she would take a peek at the new life outside the colony from time to time, but then she'd come running back. It was no wonder; some of the bigger, more ferocious dogs out there would ambush her; they wouldn't let her go until they had ripped her to pieces. Mini would come back to the colony, howling pathetically, as if to say, 'Mini's dying, Mini's dying.' There she would be at her former owner's door, wagging her tail. 'Please let me in. Won't you let me in? They'll kill me. I'm telling you the truth.' But no one would let her in. No one wanted to disobey the young master's orders. Only the boy's father (the mother had taken to her bed; what ailed her, in fact, is difficult to say) wasn't subject to his son's whims and could have let Mini in. He could have talked to his son and brought him round so that things would have been as they had been before. But he didn't. As soon as he saw Mini, he gave the dog a good swift kick. It was as if he had been waiting all this time for the pleasure but had restrained himself, leery of his impulsive son.

Naturally, the tender-hearted children in the colony and some of the more compassionate mothers took pity on the dog. But not before they cracked a few jokes at her expense. Where once they had teased her by calling her 'Madam Mini', now they just called her 'Mini, the common streetwalker'. They would say, 'Why don't you go back to that young man of yours? All this time you thought you were so great. Why don't you go back to him now? Okay, okay. Just let me see if there's some vegetable peels or a bone in the garbage for you.' They weren't about to miss this golden opportunity to spit on the vainglorious Mr Ghosh by calling his once treasured family pet a common stray. They weren't about to lose this chance to humble the pride of the Ghosh family, to let them know just what they thought of people who got rich by taking bribes; (and in the eyes of the children) they were not about to give up the chance to bring down that good-looking kid with the fair complexion just a peg or two. But they also

wanted to make sure everyone knew that they weren't jealous, oh no, they knew the meaning of compassion, don't you see? 'Enough! Enough. You ate something, didn't you? Now why don't you get out of here? Do you think you own the place?'

And so from one house she would get a bone to nibble on, from another an inedible banana peel and from yet another a crust of bread, hard as a piece of leather. She would drag these to the street, often only to watch helplessly while other dogs snatched them from her before she could eat them. But somehow she stayed alive. She depended on the housing colony, and from time to time she would even glance wistfully over at number 11, in the faint hope that her little master in his short pants would come out of the house for something and would take her in his arms again. But that never happened. She did sometimes get to see her former master, but he didn't pay any attention to her and just went about his business. Off he would go and sit somewhere, all by himself. Watching the sunset.

Yes, now you know who her former master was. It was the youngest son of the Ghosh family, that wicked, evil Santu. The former villain in the children's tale in the housing colony, and then the villain in the adolescents' story, and now the villain in the memories of us middle-aged men. The devil himself.

I felt only contempt for him, deep contempt. I didn't have the courage then to realize that it is the gods who are in the habit of doing just what Santu was doing: being wilful and impulsive, taking someone in their arms and then flinging them into the dirt for reasons known only to themselves. But I was no different from the others then; I was sure he was the devil incarnate.

And yet I can say with the pride of a romantic that despite my utter contempt for Santu I could still see the pain in his eyes. And, having seen that pain, one day I even tried to strike up a conversation with him. I wanted to ask him about Mini. I got no further than, 'Mini was your pet, wasn't she?' when he screamed back at me, 'You bastard!' He didn't so much as look at me. Well, I said to myself, if that's the

way you want it. But it didn't mean that I felt like joining Gajen and Jayanta when they dumped all over Santu, even now.

How could I say with any certainty that Santu in all his pain wasn't worthy of the flowing compassion of lovely Chanda?

I heard Jayanta say, with the air of one who knows all, 'Do you want to know what I think? That girl thought he was just one more stray dog. She couldn't stand the idea of his not eating out of her hand, just like all the other strays she had tamed.' Amused at his own cleverness, Jayanta laughed and laughed.

It bothered me. They hadn't the slightest inkling of the true nature of compassion. Not one of them. When compassion begins to flow, who knows in what direction it will rush? The important thing becomes giving of yourself; it doesn't matter if the object of your compassion is someone you love or someone you despise. Do you know what I think? Shall I tell you? That heart-wrenching story of one cold night, a page from a longer tale, now worm-eaten, the wretched last page of Mini the stray's life. It belonged to Chanda, and in the end, just maybe, it left her frightened, not knowing what to do. No, no, I won't say a word. They would only laugh at what I felt. They would say, 'And you wonder why we call you Batakrishna? You're such a fool, a hopeless romantic!' That's not all they'd say; they'd twist my words and they'd say even worse things about Chanda than they do now. No. Let it be. I'll keep my thoughts to myself. What I feel is mine, no one else's. It's mine alone. No one would understand it anyway. And so I kept silent.

But I'm going to tell you today. I can't keep it to myself any longer. And I feel that you'll be able to see beyond coarse vulgarity; you'll be able to savour the experience of compassion in a way that you have never done before. In a way that only Chanda has made possible. And you'll know this Batakrishna for what he really is and maybe even grant him a modicum of your respect.

I told you that Mini the stray wasn't about to give up on life so easily. She went on living, year after year. She had been like a pampered child, though, and she couldn't stand the onslaught of the scorching

heat or the freezing cold. She couldn't endure the pangs of hunger and thirst, the torment of sickness and disease; she wasn't up to fights with the other stray dogs. And so the hair on her body began to fall out. Red patches of skin showed through what little fur was left of her matted, mangy coat; in places, there were open sores. Sometimes it wasn't easy to tell between skin and scabs. Above one of her green eyes was a pocket of pus; fluid dripped constantly from the eye. She could barely walk; most of the time she just sat scratching herself. She couldn't keep the flies and mosquitoes off her, no matter how much they tormented her. Suddenly, she would lift her head and howl in impotent rage. It was if she poured out all of her anguish into that one wail, that one moment of sound. It was as if she wanted to ask of the heavens, 'Why, why me? What did I do to deserve this?'

What was even more surprising, though, was that gradually, very gradually, she changed from 'Mini the streetwalker', the butt of everyone's bad jokes, to Dhedhi, a stray whom people pitied. Half-dead, she became just one of the many stray dogs. After so many years, one bright early morning, her plight finally touched our hearts. Oh my! Is this Mini? Pampered, spoiled Mini, the princess? How could this have happened to her? Couldn't we have done something to help her? If we had only known, we would have taken her in. We would have fed her and taken care of her; we would have got her some medicine, something for her sores. What's the use? It's too late now. Now no one should even touch her, never mind taking her into their house!

In the meantime, in the three or four years that had elapsed, Chanda had turned into a young lady of fifteen. Now she wore a sari and kept company with college girls. She was prettier than ever in a stand-offish, unapproachable way. Santu, the same age as Chanda, had traded his short pants for bell-bottoms. He had started with cigarettes and graduated to hash. He had long moved on from being a 'naughty boy' to being 'devilish'. There was, of course, something alluring in his new style (he had borrowed the dark glasses, the scooter, and the sneer on his face very successfully from the villains in Hindi movies),

and those who were drawn to the gang-leader image gave him the proper respect, respect that was not without a touch of fear. Santu was fast becoming not just devilish but the very devil himself.

One day, Bhanu, with his thick glasses, asked me to go for tea with him. I told him all the latest gossip I had read about the movie stars, and in exchange I had to listen to stories about his life at home. Most of it was boring stuff, but in the heaps and heaps of ashes there sometimes was a spark—news of Chanda. And so I encouraged him to keep talking.

That was how I came to know that it wasn't just us. I finally came to know that even Chanda, the self-appointed protecting goddess of stray dogs and cats, didn't want anything to do with Mini. She wouldn't even go near Mini. You couldn't blame her; she had her reasons, only they were secret.

It wouldn't be quite right to say that I had uncovered the secret, but I still had no doubt that in this situation a girl like Chanda could not have done anything other than what she did.

This was because Chanda had been told in no uncertain terms that if she wanted to remain Miss Chanda Prasada, she was not to have anything to do with the Ghosh's cast-off Mini, poor Mini, who by now had come down in the world in a rather shocking way. How was Chanda told this? Was she told it in so many words or in subtle ways that a clever girl couldn't fail to understand? And what was the reason behind it? Did one rich man want to prove to everyone else that another equally rich man was a terrible person? Or was it a face-saving device, a way of saying, 'Do you think I'm going to take in the dog you've kicked out? Do you think I'm going to caress and fondle what you've trampled underfoot? What do you think I am?' I can't answer any of these questions; Bhanu didn't tell me anything about these things. Most likely he figured I would know anyway. It was as if after all the years he had been teaching me stuff, he hoped that some of it had finally sunk in and I had smartened up. All he told me, then, was that no matter what anyone else in the colony did, Chanda would never

even call Mini to her if anyone w. s around, and she would never dare to show the poor creature any affection. If her father heard she had, my God ...

After we became more intimate, sharing so many cups of tea, one day he suddenly blurted out, 'I knew it! (A sly smile) ... I knew it. She goes to see Mini. Maybe she can't give her rice or bread, but she sneaks her some chocolate. And that's not all. She sprinkles talcum powder on her. At night. When it's dark. You know that old dried-up well behind the library? She hides behind it. My God. If my father ever gets wind of this ...'

I don't need to tell you that I was thrilled with the news. After all, I had expected nothing less from Chanda. Her compassion wasn't such a trickle of a thing that a mere order from someone could forcibly stop its flow. It would triumph, maybe not in the light, but in darkness. Maybe not out there on the front lawn, but hidden behind an old well.

Now I saw things, the same old things, with new eyes. And I was entranced. How many times did I see Chanda sitting alone on the lawn in her usual way with Valu or one of the other dogs? She would be petting the dog, playing with it, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere. It was like the way a woman might read the Gita, out of habit, even though she was really thinking about what to make for supper. One of those times I noticed poor Mini wandering around. She wasn't too far from Chanda, but Chanda didn't call her. Once I'd thought to myself, 'You too?' But now that I had heard the story from Bhanu, I could see in her distracted look a kind of tenderness. I understood its meaning, and I felt ashamed of myself. I realized that Chanda might not call Mini to her side but her eyes followed Mini wherever she went. That was why Chanda had seemed so distracted. Her mind wasn't on the dog she held in her lap at all; her heart was with the pitiful Mini, who was for the time being outside her reach. Her hand itched to stroke Mini's bare back, to smooth down the few hairs that were left, to cover the bare red patches of skin with her own

soft palms. She knew, of course, that her small palms could never conceal all of that ugliness from sight, but love isn't quite so rational. With all of this frustrated, pent-up yearning, Chanda must have found the days unbearable. She must have waited impatiently for night to fall.

Ah! Who would have guessed that she was about to lose forever this love that kept her heart beating wildly, this love that craved the darkness of night? Was Fate so jealous that it couldn't stand to see even that little bit of fulfilment?

The night of destruction drew near. The second round-up by the city dog catchers. Someone had lodged a complaint at City Hall that no matter how many times they had requested help in getting rid of the dogs, no one had come. And even when they did come, they had not done a thorough job, just caught a few dogs as a token gesture and called it quits. And so this time the dog catchers had vowed that they wouldn't let a single dog escape their clutches. It didn't matter how much the children cried, or fought and screamed, or begged and pleaded. They would snatch the dogs from their arms, all those lousy stupid dogs, and one by one they would ...

Fathers told their children that this time they wouldn't listen to their objections. They were to come at night, and in the space of one hour they were to get rid of all those filthy creatures. The parks would finally be clean and safe.

It's probably true that the terror of the night must precede the sparkling clarity of the dawn. The grotesque torment of waiting for death. Imagining, envisioning, suffering.

That night there was a full moon. That must have been why the dogs whose hour had come could see their tormenters so clearly, those messengers of death, with their cries and their hideous grins and the dark shadows of their clubs. The chugging of the generator of the eight-storey hospital across the street could not only be heard; it could be seen. The obscene croaking of the frogs in the pond could not only be heard .... It seemed as if the shadows that appeared from

nowhere and vanished into nothingness that night were not the shadows of ordinary denizens of this world. The spreading darkness advanced, taunted, mocked. There was no chance for any living being to reflect on the approaching death, come to terms with it, find peace in it. Not tonight. Not with the contest of strength, the contest of wills that was beginning.

Never mind what the others did in their restlessness. It's Mini I care about. That wailing ... She had taken on herself all the suffering of the others, gathered up all the humiliations of her little life (never mind the few happy days of her puppyhood, already long forgotten) and cried as she never had before and never would again. I'll sing my song of woe, I'll sing of all that you have done to me, listen earth, listen sky, hear my lament!

Chanda was standing on the porch, holding Valu by the leash. She heard it. She didn't dare take a step. Maybe if it hadn't been a moonlit night she might have run out there, at least to soften Mini's last moments with the balm of her compassion. But now there was nothing she could do. There was nothing she could do but listen to that wail of pain and let it go on happening, all that suffering, all that misery...

Ah! Is it really true that she couldn't have done anything?

Valu tugged at the leash and barked. He wanted to go out there. There's no question that what he wanted was to find some dog to mate with; it was that time of the year. Up until now, the high-born Valu hadn't been allowed to give in to such base instincts. Be patient, wait. We'll find some thoroughbred princess for you. But until then, forgive me, I won't listen to your pleas. Bark all you want. Go ahead! Chanda knew the rules. If she slipped up even slightly (in Bhanu's words), my God ...

But do you know what happened? I was sitting in Bhanu's room, watching her. Chanda couldn't stand it any more. She didn't stop to think of what would happen. She just opened the floodgates, the floodgates of her compassion.

She let Valu go. This was Valu's first taste of such freedom; he had been kept from satisfying his lust all his life. And where did he run?

He ran straight to poor Mini, the one everyone shunned, the one no one would touch, poor Mini, who had fallen from grace.

Could she have done something more than that for Mini, on that one night, the night of Mini's death?

It was not too many years later that the soft-hearted Chanda married the suffering Santu, who had been the cause of all of Mini's misery. Do I still have to explain to you why? My dense friends might not understand, but is there not one of you who'll agree with me, who'll applaud my analysis?

Was I right when I told you I am a romantic? If I weren't a romantic, would I have shown you what I did? Shown you this naked example of how a person can be so cruel to a mute, innocent creature? Or was this really an advertisement for another, more secret, perverted nakedness? No, no. Forgive me. I don't want to put a rope around my neck. After all, I am a human being.

I heard Jayanta say, 'Now listen. If the daughter of a big man in the supply division doesn't marry the son of a big man in the foods division, whom would she marry? One of us ordinary guys with nothing to our names? Can't you get that into your skull?'

Fine. Fine with me. Say what you want. Say it was a 'class' thing. But don't lose all faith in the human race. Say, it is there, still there. Compassion, maybe, or at least something like it. Suicide is not the only answer.

The Alleyway Cinema

'It's gone! It's gone! Damn it! The string's broken. Goddamn it!'

(The sound of laughter.)

(Clapping and more clapping.)

'You little bastard. Who gave you permission to climb onto my roof? Are you going to come down or not?'

Makara didn't even have time to rewind the reel of string. He left the tangled kite to its own fate and somehow managed to jump from the roof of the shop onto the crumbling wall that surrounded the shack of some destitute widow. Clutching the reel in one hand, he gingerly tiptoed along the top of the wall and then jumped down into the alley. He landed on a heap of ashes and rubbish that was piled up by the side of the wall; that was the best way to make sure that he didn't break an arm or a leg. How was he supposed to know that a treacherous, slimy banana leaf was hiding in the heap of ashes, just lying in wait to trip him up and catapult him into the open sewer? And how was he supposed to know that at that very instant some naked child would be pissing into that very sewer? It wasn't bad enough that he had landed on the sharp point of the reel of string that was poking into his butt; now his chest was awash in piss. Given how angry this humiliating, ignominious defeat had made him, given the fact that to him it was a fate far worse than death, what came out of his mouth was not surprising. The children, who were thoroughly enjoying the spectacle, would probably have gone on grinning through their teeth and clapping their hands but for the remark that crowned his string of curses. It was without a doubt his most deadly curse.

'Even Yama, the God of Death, can't stand coming to this stinking, piss-hole alley.'

With that, he spat on the alley three times and bounded off, heading for the spot where the alleyway meets the street.

You can easily imagine that he never made it. In fact, he hadn't gone very far at all before they surrounded him and began to give him a good beating. Over all the shouts and yells that accompanied his punishment could be heard this one refrain: 'What did you say? Did you call our alleyway a stinking piss-hole? Just where do you think you were flying your kite, then? Do you think you own this place? If that's what you think of it, why did you come here? Bastard!'

It didn't take long for the news that the alley kids were beating Makara to reach the other boys on the street corner. The alley kids were making trouble. Okay. We'll fix them. Where can they run? Wherever they're headed, they'll have to come out of their alley onto the street. We'll be there, waiting. We'll show them, won't we? We'll break their legs, one by one. We'll pull down their pants and make them sweat. We'll set the dogs on them. What will they be able to do to us then? Their leaders were full of threats like these, threats of the revenge they would take, but not one would actually have dared to go into the alley and pull Makara from the grip of his oppressors. They were sure they would be no match for the alley kids inside the alley itself. The alley kids would come crawling out of every nook and cranny, from the drainpipes and ditches, so many soldiers ready to fight. Not just human soldiers; there would be frogs, snakes, rats, moles, and thousands and millions of weapons, clumps of dung. Don't you remember what they did to us last year during Diwali? But just let the bastards come out here into the light! Not just dogs. We'll set mad bulls on them, too!

Their taunts and jeers grew louder. They even mustered up the courage to fling a few clods of earth in the direction of the alley, but no one had the guts to run down there; they would go a few paces and quickly run back as if they were playing a game of 'Catch me if you can'.

Makara's position was worsening; the time for crying and slobbering was over. It wouldn't be long before blood began to flow.

It's hard to say what eventually would have happened, whether the street kids would have had enough and rushed in to rescue their

friend and a full-scale war would have erupted. Makara was about to use his most powerful weapon, his teeth, when suddenly they all heard a deep, grave voice.

'Stop it!'

Without even turning around to see, the attackers knew to whom the voice belonged. It wasn't just anyone's voice. It was the voice of none other than Mr Sura himself, the son of the alley's one big man, the alley's prestigious absentee landlord, owner of the big house with the big gate, the one person none of them dared disobey. There was nothing to stop them from making faces at him behind his back, imitating the way he walked, or snidely singing after him, 'There goes the king; look at him go, butt all a-swing', just as long as they knew he couldn't hear them. But when he was within earshot, standing right in front of them in all his glory, with his hanging belly, his greying moustache, and fat round face, they wouldn't dare open their mouths. If they did, there was no saving them. Even before the old man could reply, their own fathers would be on them, giving them more than a few good whacks. As if he really were the king or something!

The beating stopped at once. Phagna, the son of the silversmith Raghu, liked a good fight, but he also knew exactly how Mr Sura would react when he said, 'Sir, do you know what he said? He spat on your gate and he said, "Mr Sura's alley is a stinking piss-hole!"'

Buli, the granddaughter of the carpenter Bhajana, in her meek and quiet voice piped up with a suggestion, 'Sir, we won't let him into our cinema.'

Mr Sura, also known as Sureshvara Das Mahapatra, smiled magnanimously, partly revealing his brown teeth.

A smile of self-satisfaction. Just look at how clever these children are! They may be afraid of me, but just see how loyal they are, how much they care about me. And how they know exactly how to get to me. What a bunch of little rascals! I know all your tricks. This alley belongs to you and me. The cinema I started in my house is your cinema and my cinema. But let me ask you, does that give you the

right to beat some poor child to a pulp? Sura gently pulled Makara over to him. By now, Makara was so angry that he could no longer contain his tears. Sura ran his hands over Makara's body to make sure that no bones were broken before he said anything more to him.

There was no use trying to figure out what had happened and who was at fault. Sura firmly believed that once the fire was out it was out; things would gradually return to normal by themselves. And so he didn't pay any attention to Makara's long litany of complaints. He merely repeated, 'Never mind all that, never mind.' And as if to show that he was the very spirit of generosity and magnanimity, and to put Buli in her place, he patted Makara on the back, bent down, and whispered in his ear, 'You'll also come to our cinema, won't you? Have you ever been to our cinema?'

Makara shook his head. Of course, he had heard about the Alleyway Cinema. But up till now he hadn't had the chance to come. Sura decided to explain to him just how it worked so that he wouldn't feel shy or afraid to come; he also thought that it wouldn't be a bad opportunity to teach all the children an important lesson. And so he smiled and winked at Buli before he began.

'Listen to me. All you children are the same. You all have the same right to come and go through this alleyway, to play here, stroll around here, fly your kites here. No alleyway stinks, and no child stinks. And the cinema that I've started in my house belongs to everyone. Do you hear me? Naturally, it's not quite as big as a real cinema hall, but what can we do? It's all we have. (Here he paused for a few seconds, as if giving vent to his sorrow.) A new movie's coming next Friday. Starring Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha.'

Sura acknowledged the children's shouts of glee with a smile and a raised hand; like a seasoned politician, he seized the opportunity to give them a few words of advice.

'But you all have to be good boys. I'll be angry if you fight, do you understand? Don't any of you forget that. Will you remember what I said?'

With that, Sura returned to chewing his betel. He gave his walking stick a little twirl and headed down the alleyway in the other direction, to Maguni's place. It was Maguni's turn to host the bridge game and lunch today.

As he walked away, there was no way he could have known that the children were twisting themselves in every possible way, trying to imitate his walk. Besides, it was a sign of his basic decency that it would never have occurred to him that there was a child in this world or in this alleyway who would want to poke fun at him. It was equally beyond his power to imagine that children didn't just fight and get done with things; they would follow the loser and mock and jeer at him. And so you would have to ask yourself, even if he had heard the taunts that the children flung at Makara as he walked home snivelling, would he have been able to understand them? There were four lines, accompanied by clapping:

'Street kids, crooks!
Alley kids, tops!
Street kids, schnooks!
Alley kids...'

But wait, maybe he had heard their jeers and was so totally confident that if another fight broke out he could stop it that he kept right on sauntering down the alleyway, smiling like that to himself, twirling his walking stick so briskly that it seemed to trace broad circles in the sky and on the ground. No, that wasn't it at all. It was well known that the most obvious characteristic of Sura's appearance and personality was a calm nonchalance. That's not to say that he didn't get angry occasionally. Some people had even seen him getting mad. In fact, a few minutes earlier, when he had called out, 'Stop it!' he had actually raised his voice. And there was a bit of fire in his eyes. But it was also well known that his anger was always in a hurry to finish its task and be gone, so that its master could quickly get back to enjoying his natural state of peaceful contentment.

Was he really so content with his life? It was unlikely that anyone had ever asked him such a question, and it was difficult even to imagine

that anyone would have dared to be so cruel. But those whose business it was to know were fully aware that Sureshvara, the eldest son of the owner of the alley's big house, that is, the eldest son of the builder of the alley's premier house, and in the opinion of some, the eldest son of the owner of the alley's only house of any distinction, yes, Sureshvara, the eldest son of the renowned gentleman Vireshvara Das Mahapatra, had never finished school. He was unemployed. He had tried his hand at working in a number of different offices, but had failed at every attempt. He had turned up his nose at any number of business ventures, and he had come home. And so, during all these twenty-five long years, what else was there for him to do but to stay here in the old and crumbling mansion his father had built. He had to be content with the money that came from the sale of agricultural products—rice, coconuts, jute, and the like—grown on the family lands in the village. His two brothers were capable of earning their own living and resided somewhere else in their own homes with their wives and children. Of course, they came to see their old father from time to time, and they helped their elder brother out now and then. But they had no intention of wasting their lives in this stinking alley, this broken-down old house as big as an elephant barn. After all, the middle brother could easily have opened his dispensary right here, but he was some big specialist in eye diseases and insisted that he needed to be in a big city like Delhi or Bombay. More ludicrous, though, was the reason given by the youngest brother, who was an engineer and building contractor in the small town of Sambalpur. He insisted that there were more opportunities in a town which was in the process of growing. The real reason was that this place always made him feel as if he would suffocate. Even when the brothers came to visit, it was a bit obvious, wasn't it, the way they would just stick their heads in, say a quick hello, and beat a hasty retreat? You couldn't fail to notice how they never stayed more than three or four days at a time. Their father had their perfectly competent (meaning totally incompetent) elder brother to look after him, didn't he? What more did he need? Never mind his brothers.

Sura also had four children of his own. The eldest one was married and living in England, working for some company. The rest were in Delhi at school; their uncle was looking after them. Do you think there's no high school, no college right here in our own Cuttack? The truth is that if they came back, they would end up stuck in this house on this alleyway. Mother and Father can stay there with Grandpa; they don't seem to mind. Just please, please, don't make us come back. As long as Grandpa pays our school fees and Mother gives us some pocket money to spend, we are perfectly happy. It was no use blaming the children; their uncles couldn't stand being here; why should they be any different? Sura was the only one. And his wife had no choice but to look after her husband and father-in-law. Hers was a living death, but it was a death of sorts. And thank heavens for that. Otherwise, one might have said with some justification that even Yama, the God of Death, couldn't stand to come to this wretched alleyway!

For these reasons, those whose business it was to know (and none of them was in any way related to Makara) had absolute contempt for the alley and unbridled compassion for Sura. They'd say, where else can the poor fellow go?

But the same people simply put two and two together and got four; they had no way of truly understanding Sura's unique personality. They had no way of understanding that he really did love his life and his alley. It would be a mistake to think that he'd had no choice in the matter, that it was just a question of coming to terms with what he'd had to live with for twenty-five years. Maybe once he had felt unhappy or distressed about it all, but that had passed, rather like today's anger, which had vanished as soon as it appeared.

Does that mean that Sura was some kind of a saint?

It would not be incorrect to say that a person who can take contradictory states, like self and other or beautiful and ugly, and somehow allow them to blend and mingle within himself until the contradiction is gone, is a saint. Could Sura do that? I doubt it. But isn't the ability to care for the other, to embrace the ugly, at least

close to the attitude of a saint? Especially when the final statement is the playful twirling of a walking stick and a gentle, private smile?

Take a good look at the repulsiveness of this alley, about which no one has ever had anything good to say. You can't close your eyes to it. Sura's eyes weren't closed, in any case. He often went out of the house to play cards, buy some fried rice cakes, post a letter, or perform some other errand, and that meant he had to walk down the alley. He had never closed his eyes nor put a handkerchief over his nose. He knew full well that the patterns traced by mud on the dirt in the alley were put there by streams of urine, but that didn't bother him. There was still plenty of space for two human feet to walk. He had seen worse than urine in the act of being made; how could he not have seen it? What else was the drain that ran from the open sewer to the front of your house for, if not for that purpose? And where were all the children supposed to go to do their business? Sometimes at night when they couldn't find the drain in the darkness, they'd do it right on the ground. Even that didn't matter. There was still plenty of space, plenty of good things to see and good things to smell. All you had to do was steer yourself in their direction; no one was stopping you. You could watch the behaviour of the shy new bride, for example, the way she half hid behind the door and watched the children playing and laughed to herself, her smile spreading from ear to ear. As if she were right there playing along with them! And you want to talk about smells? You couldn't beat the delicious smell of boiling molasses syrup that came from the crippled old lady's house. And that round thing in your path that looks something like mud? Well, don't look down your nose at it. Mark this: one day, someone will use it to plant the flowers that we'll then use to worship the sun and the moon. Of course, there were sights that occasionally stung Sura's eyes. Like the time he saw the old woman at the water tap; she had her back to the road and was letting the water from the tap wash over her naked behind. Sura had closed his eyes despite himself, but it was only for a second. And as soon as he opened them, they were treated to a thoroughly charming

sight, or rather the whole of him was; a little girl, running from somewhere, bounded right into him. True, he got a bit messed up, but nothing could have detracted from the unalloyed pleasure that the girl's unselfconscious loveliness gave him. The smile returned to his lips, as if he wanted to say, 'See what an inexhaustible sense of wonder this alley is!'

Even if Sura didn't consider the ugliness to be a form of beauty, he was able to embrace it all, ugliness and beauty, as if to say that these things are the very stuff of life, my life; these are my most intimate companions. And, given that this was his attitude towards the world around him, who would dare to say that his everyday calm nonchalance, his contentment and happiness, were nothing but a sham?

His most intimate companions. Not just the flotsam and jetsam of the bazaar. It was as if he walked through life with the firm intention of slowly, deliberately touching everything that had anything at all to do with any living being, no matter how chaotic, how disordered, deliberately touching it, smelling it, and loving it. He was one of them, an ordinary man, no matter what they said about him, no matter if they set him above them, called him elder brother, father, even king. He was really just one of them. Mr Sura, eldest son of the alleyway's rich man.

Who is the 'other'? Who is one's own? The king who considers his subjects as 'other' is not a true king. Sura had turned this conviction over in his mind many a time and had come to the firm conclusion that he was neither a king nor a landowner nor anyone's master.

He was simply the son of the man who owned the finest house on the alley, that was all, nothing more. Anyway, their family had long ceased to amount to much of anything. It was not out of respect for any status he might have inherited that Sura could have claimed to be king. If he had any claim to that position, it was because he had the ability to consider all of them his own. He mixed with them; he shared their sorrows and joys, their defeats and victories. He sat down at the same table and ate with them. That time when the monkey got out of

control and attacked, he had swooped up Bhajana's granddaughter (a cute little thing with a snub nose); when the washerman Madhu had died, he had sprinkled water from the Ganga on his lips, water that he had brought back from Haridwar when he had made a pilgrimage there with his younger brother, the one who was in Delhi; he had refereed all the fights in the alleyway, the quarrels between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, between sons and fathers, between brothers and relatives who had suddenly become rivals over property (of course, not all young people accepted his verdicts these days, but then the world was changing). And on the holidays he had feted them all, served plenty of food and drink, leaving out nothing that they might have desired. As he thought back on all these things, Sura came to another conclusion: when his father died, he would arrange a magnificent feast in his memory, a feast that would be talked about for generations to come. Not for the rich and prominent citizens of the town, but for my brothers, my neighbours on the alleyway.

And the best, the most exciting thing that I've done is the cinema I've opened in my house!

Sura didn't know that everyone simply called his theatre the Alleyway Cinema. If he had known, it would have made him happier still to think that his devotion to the alley had so quickly come to the point where something that was his was adopted by everyone else as their own.

I remember when we got the first record player in the alleyway. Maybe it wasn't the first just in the alleyway; it may have been the first for miles around. I was a child then; my father still had some prestige and status. There was one room in the house that faced the alleyway; no one pays any attention to it now; now it's full of bookcases stacked high with all our old books. Anyway, my father had set the record player up in that room. Lines from famous songs would float out onto the street; songs about the river Ganga, about the Round Table, about a feast at some king's court. The children of the alleyway would crowd around the open window, pushing and shoving to get a closer look.

Sura remembered the scene. One particular incident kept coming back to him. They were playing the record about the king's court. They had even served all sorts of delicious things to eat and drink, from hot fried rice to plump sweetmeats. For some reason, there were more people that day than usual. Perhaps because not everyone could see the window from the alleyway, the children had climbed up the wall surrounding the house to get a better look; they were standing on the wall, two children deep. Amid the pushing and shoving, it was only natural that a few would fall and have to climb back again. Sometimes, before the child who had fallen could get back up to reclaim his place, someone else had pushed forward to occupy it. Fights broke out. My father still didn't shut the window. 'Dirty little rascals,' he said with a smile. He seemed to be enjoying the sight. But it didn't make me feel like smiling at all. I wanted to invite them in, to say to them, 'Come in. Come in and make yourselves comfortable.' Instead, I kept silent, as if to say that these were their squabbles and had nothing to do with us.

But there was one child with us in the room; he was the son of a friend of my father's, the sub-registrar Mukunda. He was fat and dark-skinned, with big, round eyes. For some reason, my father particularly liked him. As if it were all some big game, this child suddenly shoved one of the others so hard that he fell off the wall, head over heels into the alley.

My father shut the window. But he didn't say a word to the culprit.

Later, we found out that the boy who had fallen had broken his leg. All my father had to say when he heard the news was, 'The bastard. He got what he deserved. He was standing there, grinning at us!'

It seemed like ages ago. Sura had long forgiven his father. He told himself that that's the way it was back then, when relationships between people were like those in a feudal society. But see how even Father has slowly changed (faster after Mother died); even he has softened. He was glad that his father had no serious objections to the new rules that Sura had set up for himself in the alley, taking the people there as his

own. In the end, he hadn't even said a word when the TV arrived and Sura would invite the children into the house on Sunday nights to watch. When TV antennas began appearing on the roofs of some of the newer houses in the alleyway, he had gone a step further. Some young man from England had brought him a VCR. Now they could watch all the films they wanted! Come children, come. Now you don't even have to wait until Sunday. Still his father made no objection. And that was not all. These days he would pull up his armchair at the back of the crowd of children and watch, too, his eyes glued to the TV screen, as if he were drinking in the excitement of every song and dance, every declaration of love and friendship, every fight.

But occasionally it pained Sura to think that the only enjoyment left to his once powerful father, Vireshvara Das Mahapatra, was to sit and stare at the TV. Was it merely sorrow he felt, or was Sura also afraid that the mighty Vireshvara might still open his formidable mouth and from it would tumble all of his unspoken rage, carefully chosen words of contempt that would put an end to the new reign. Sura tried to make fun of his fears. And if he did, what would you do? Would you run away with your tail between your legs like your brothers did? Would you have the guts to stand up to him and fight for your new regime? And this would give him the courage he needed to dismiss his foolish doubts. Forgive me, but the old feudal lord Vireshvara can't come back. He'll have to join his middle-aged son and learn to enjoy the new regime and the Alleyway Cinema. And he will, too.

Father never did open his mouth. In fact, these days he had pretty much stopped talking altogether. The doctor said there was nothing wrong with his vocal apparatus; it seemed to be some problem with his mind, the kind of thing that happens to old people. Sometimes words would come from his mouth, less and less frequently, but what words! Apropos of nothing, he would shout, 'Get rid of that crow!' The crow's nowhere near you; it's on the roof of that skinny old lady's house; why should it bother you? Or suddenly, without warning, he would announce, 'It won't rain today.' It was a perfectly ordinary, dry,

hot, summer day; there wasn't a trace of a cloud in the sky; no sane person would even think of rain. Occasionally, he would say something kind and gentle, even if it was a bit out of context. Once, these words had come tumbling out, addressed to his daughter-in-law: 'Have you ever eaten Mughlai chicken?' When his daughter-in-law shook her head, he had said, 'Fine, fine. Go and get Hamid.' The old man remembered that once there had been someone named Hamid who had made Mughlai chicken for him. Even stranger than this, one day he noticed that his daughter-in-law had changed the colour of the bindi on her forehead and he asked her about it. He teased the young servant boy, 'So, do I see you growing a moustache? Do you think you'll pass for some king or great lord?' But for the most part his depression was unrelieved (the doctors called it total depression); his lips were tightly sealed, and his jowls were slack. The exceptions were the moments when words like these would come from his mouth; to tell the truth, they were not unamusing.

But ... but ... he never says anything to me. He'll talk to my wife, the servant, and the cook; he'll talk to all sorts of people from his past or just mutter to himself. But he never says a word to me. It's almost as if he refuses to speak to his eldest son! Sura felt like laughing. Why should I be afraid of him? My father's afraid of me!

What else could it be? What did I ever do to him that he should stare at me like that, eyes wide open, as if they would bore right through me? As if the fire of his anger has been smouldering for years. What is it he wants to say to me after all this time? Your other sons have gone away; they've done what they want, made their own happiness. I am the only one who's stayed with you. I am the one who takes care of you. I look after your property and your possessions. I do it, my wife does it, it all comes down to the same thing. Even if I had gone on to finish school, if I had made something of myself the way they did, what good would that have done you? Okay, I'll admit it. I am an unworthy son. I dashed all your hopes to the ground, but at least tell me this, didn't I bring you a daughter-in-law who was to

your liking? Not just a daughter-in-law, but four grandsons and granddaughters. And two tiny great-grandchildren as well. Whenever they come here, you open your mouth again. You won't let that great-grandson of yours out of sight even for a minute. He's just learning to walk, but you make him sit on your lap and you feed him so much rice that he can't get it all in his mouth; some of it falls and messes up his clothes ...

Forget it. Sura made up his mind that his father's silence wasn't just an act of hostility directed against Sura; it couldn't be. He also made up his mind that before his father closed his mouth once and for all, the two of them were going to have a proper talk with each other.

But all of this was just a passing cloud on the otherwise calm surface of Sura's nature. He was now the uncontested master of the alleyway; what did he have to be depressed about?

To be sure, today, on this day off (actually, my friends' day off; every day's a day off for me), even before he played bridge at Maguni's place, Sura had plenty of reasons to be in the kind of good mood that would spill over into his walking stick as he twirled it around. The fact that he had stopped the fight between Makara and the alley kids pleased him, but the speech he had given them pleased him even more. It was as if a real live ruler had summoned the rulers of other countries and urged upon them, 'Brothers, forget your anger and jealousy. All our countries are the same. All people, no matter what their race, are the same. Throw your atomic weapons away; cast them into the sea!' He swayed to and fro in his unbounded pleasure at his own sense of power and his certain conviction of his noble goodness and generosity; but he still would not have been quite so high if it were not for a totally different happiness that spread over his mind like a fine carpet of many colours. The experience of last night. The way he had made love with his wife Bharati. At his age (he had just turned sixty). He still felt such desire, such bliss. He was sure that nothing could compete with it; it was the ultimate fulfilment that life had to offer; it was life's ultimate gift of success.

Sura had the feeling that today it didn't matter whether Maguni was his partner or Vishi; he was sure to win. I won't even have to count. Lady luck is with me; I can feel it. But then without a second thought he banished his desire to win. He said, 'So, I lose. What difference does that make to me?'

The Alleyway Cinema was actually the rooftop of his house. One section of it was covered to protect the equipment, the TV and the VCR. The rest was open so that you could admire the beauty of the sky, the moon and stars, the birds flying above, and the leaves that rustled in the wind. He had his wife Bharati to thank for this arrangement. As in all things related to the running of the house, Sura had not the slightest objection to letting things go just the way she wanted. But he never had much luck spending time admiring the sky and its wonders; he would soon become bored. Inevitably, his glance would turn to the alleyway below. One day he would watch Padmini, who had been at her daughter-in-law's throat not long ago, now gently combing the woman's hair. And what was that signboard Bhajana, the carpenter's son, had hung on their door? He had said he was going to buy a printing press. The poor fool wants to be a big man ... Our children really are terrible. Look at the way they torment these dogs. What are they doing? Trying to knot their tails? These were the sights that interested him, the simple activities of his subjects. As he watched them, his mind bubbled over with joy and itched with curiosity; this was all he needed.

It was Friday night. Movie night at the Alleyway Cinema. The crowd of children had already gathered on the rooftop; it seemed to Sura that the crowd was particularly large tonight. That must be Makara's doing. There he was, sitting there like some honoured guest. No doubt he had told everyone he knows that tonight was the Alleyway Cinema night. They were showing a film with Rekha and Amitabh Bachchan. Who knows why, but tonight's crowd somehow seemed different to Sura. Was it that some of the faces were new to him? Or was it something else? Whatever it was, Sura didn't waste much time on it; he put the film right on.

The spectators were sitting on a cotton carpet on the floor. Sura and his wife Bharati Devi were sitting at the back in comfortable chairs. Not far from them old Vireshvara was slouched in an armchair made of cane, his feet stretched out in front of him. Normally, as soon as the film began, he would sit up straight and watch it closely. But today he seemed to lack his usual enthusiasm. Bharati was worried for a minute, but she was soon reassured. Father was sitting up straight. This was the point in the movie when Amitabh Bachchan had his opponent by the collar of his shirt and had yanked him up right under his own nose as he said, 'Listen to me, you dirty dog!'

The movie had been running for a while. Usually, by this time Sura had his eyes closed not because he had been carried away by sleep, but because he had been carried away by the pleasure of it all. At least, so he thought. But today's rush of pleasure was not uninterrupted. Today, he kept thinking about his children and grandchildren who lived so far from him, particularly about one granddaughter named Mili; she was his favourite. I never tried to prevent you from living your own lives, having your own fun, in Delhi, in England, wherever. But couldn't you have at least left your children with me? She could be sitting right on my lap, watching the movie with me, clapping away; when Amitabh Bachchan screams, 'Keep your mouth shut!' to someone, she could shout, too, 'Keep your mouth shut!' My little princess ...

Of course, his grandson, the apple of everyone's eye, was a daddy's boy. Sura didn't open his eyes, but the fluttering of his lips seemed more noticeable.

Suddenly, there was the unexpected sound of laughter, then a girl's scream, and finally the sound of a slap. Sura jumped up, shouting, 'What's going on?' He thought he'd better stop the movie and turn on the lights.

When he turned on the lights, he still didn't understand what was going on. He had the impression that in the cover of darkness some boy must have taken undue liberties with some girl, and she had

screamed. He was determined to do something about it; he would not tolerate such behaviour in his house.

But what did he see? The girl, a fair-skinned creature with a round face, was laughing! She was blushing, it was true, but she was also laughing soundlessly. It was as if she hadn't been able to keep her pleasure to herself and was now embarrassed that she had actually laughed out loud. She was saying, 'I'm sorry.'

That wasn't all. The children who had gathered around her, the boys, were also chuckling away.

Sura thought he would get angry. He thought that he should get angry, but he wasn't quite sure why. It was not clear that anything had actually happened. No one was crying, no one had accused anyone of anything; on the contrary, they all seemed to find it quite funny, as if they had discovered some new joke. And at the centre of all this fun was that round-faced, fair-complexioned little girl, twelve or thirteen years old. Her clothes weren't exactly loud, but they were bright enough. Her thick brown hair was loose and looked as if it had just been washed. Her eyes were clear as crystal, and the way she smiled, so that you could see her glittering white teeth! Sura had the feeling that this girl was different from the other children; she was from a different species, a different world. She was like Sita, King Rama's wife in the famous story of the Ramayana, who found herself kidnapped by a demon and held captive in a forest of ashoka trees surrounded by demons. But this one was a wily Sita.

When he looked at Bharati, Sura had the distinct impression that she didn't like what was going on at all. He knew then that he had no choice but to get angry. After all, there were limits to what was allowed in polite society. It wouldn't do at all for a child from a decent family, a girl no less, to mix with just anyone, to sit up close, practically touching just anyone; to fool around like that, pinching and tickling each other! Who could say where such things would lead? What are you looking at? Call her over here. What's her name? Ask her. Sura understood that this was what his wife demanded of him, without her

saying so much as a single word. And he knew he had to do something. For the present, for the past, and for the future. He may not have to close down the cinema altogether, but at least he would have to change the format; maybe have separate times or separate seats for boys and girls, something ...

But before Sura could do anything he was astonished to see his old father sitting up straight in his chair and beckoning the little girl. He decided to make sure that his father's summons, which might have been unclear, had its desired effect. Loudly and clearly he told the girl to go over there.

The girl stood between father and son and without a trace of shyness introduced herself. She let it be known that she was from a perfectly respectable family; her name was Susmita and her father's name was Prasada Patnaik. Her father was an income tax officer. They lived in a rented house on a road that was on the other side of the alleyway. Makara lived next door to her; he was her friend (Sura and Bharati looked at each other). He had told her that there was a movie tonight, a really good movie.

Father's so deaf he couldn't possibly have heard a word that the little flirt said. But then what's that little spark in his eyes? His mouth, which had been hanging slightly open, is closed again, and, while I guess it would be an exaggeration to say he's smiling, at least he seems to be trying to say something. He looked at his son. Sura was waiting. Finally, after all these days ...

'Pitti, our Pitti.'

At first he didn't understand. Bharati did, though, and she explained it to him. 'Father must be thinking of Priti, your sister. She must have looked like this when she was that age.'

God save us! Sura didn't make any effort to correct his father's delusions. But he was pleased that he was the one responsible for his father's happy memories, he and his cinema and no one else.

But Sura's astonishment knew no bounds when his father began calling out the names of the others, as if he already had Priti with him

but wanted them too. He turned to his son and in an imperious voice demanded, 'Bhola, call Bhola ... Call Nuru ... Call Mina ...' It was as if he were setting out a royal banquet; one by one, he remembered his sons and daughters, nephews and nieces, and had them summoned. In his confusion, Sura could only shake his head and say, 'Yes, yes.'

But he was struck dumb when he heard these words come out of the old man's mouth:

'Call Shobhani. Do you hear me?'

When Sura didn't answer, his father kept repeating the same words, like a broken record.

'Call Shobhani. Do you hear me?'

'Call Shobhani. Do you hear me?'

(Louder this time.) 'Call ... call Shobhani ...'

It didn't take Sura long to remember that Shobhani was Shobhan, the fat, bug-eyed son of the sub-registrar who had pushed an alley kid from the window for no good reason, so that he would die or break an arm or leg. His father had loved the boy. He had loved him a lot. He had always included him among his own children when they listened to the record about the king's court. I've heard that he is now a big judge somewhere. Father must know.

'Call Shobhani.'

Stop it! Sura yelled to himself. He wanted ... what did he want? To yank his father out of the chair and throw him to the ground? That wouldn't stop him; the record would go on playing. He had so much contempt saved up for his worthless son who had never amounted to anything worthwhile. But I refuse. Fine. If you want to call your other two sons, Bhola and Nuru, I won't object. But I draw the line at Shobhani. I refuse to call Shobhani. I absolutely refuse to call Shobhani.

Father, you can't hear any more and your head's in a muddle. Otherwise, I would poke my fingers in your eyes and show you that ... that ...

Success stinks!

(He couldn't think of any word other than this one, so close to the hearts of the alleyway's kids.)

Behind every success is the oppression of someone else, the power of victory, subjugation. But it's dangerous to worry about who dies in the process. And so from the time you are a small child you have to learn which wretch you should trample to make your big and powerful 'uncle' laugh. Only then can you become a big man.

I know, I know. My brothers were no different; my own children were no different. I was the odd man out. But, Father, you told me yourself, didn't you? That, when you were a child back in the village you had pushed some poor slob into the lake? That would explain why you were able to love Shobhan so much, wouldn't it?

Sura's footsteps could be heard loud and clear as he walked away. He didn't have the courage to let anyone hear the words or the chilling laughter of contempt that he had inside him. Bharati followed him out. She had never seen her husband so angry. She asked, 'Who's Shobhani?'

'He's nobody, that's who.'

You would have to say that something good came out of the event. Sura's feet stayed firmly rooted on the noble path that he had chosen. The Alleyway Cinema not only remained open, but there was no change in the way it operated. There was nothing to prevent Susmita from coming again and again with Makara to see the movies.

Mr Absent-Minded, His Wife, and Co.

There was a time when if you called Durlabha names like 'Mr Absent-Minded', 'Mr Forgetful', or 'Mr Out of It' he would give you an embarrassed smile or even make a half-hearted attempt to defend himself, all the while enjoying a distinct sense of pride in the fact that he wasn't like everyone else. He would think that while it was true he wasn't a philosopher or a professor, his mind still craved for higher things; it was not to be bogged down in the muck of daily life. It goes without saying that Durlabha was not beyond using his reputation for being absent-minded for his own ends, especially when women were present. He had even been known to stick his hand into a guest's plate or to come out to greet you with his shirt inside out; when a discussion got too heated for him, he would get a vacant look in his eyes and stare into space, begging your pardon a few minutes later. If you wanted to put all of this in a favourable light, I guess you could say that such behaviour wasn't really the kind of silly ruse more at home in some comic farce; it belonged quite solidly to the world of serious literature, to that exaggeration of the truth designed to give you and me a special pleasure.

Whatever you might once have thought of his absent-mindedness and other-worldliness, by the time he was an old man, Durlabha had had so much practice with it and had refined it to such a degree that he had become truly and wholly out of things. Judging by ordinary standards, one might even have said that he had become quite hopeless. But to those who loved him, he had only become pathetic; and with that he had become still more lovable. They were ready to forgive him even his worst lapses. When he invited a neighbour nobody liked, huge family and all, to the celebration in honour of his grandson's annaprasanna, his daughter Nilima merely laughed and brushed it aside.

'Never mind,' she said. 'That's just the way Father is. He's always been that way.' When he forgot to collect his granddaughter on time from her nursery school and caused his daughter Sarama no end of consternation, Sarama only sighed and said, 'It was my mistake. No, not my mistake. It was all Mother's fault. After all, couldn't she have reminded Father that he was supposed to go?' And then there was the time he forgot that his daughter-in-law existed and began to change his clothes right in front of her, until there he was, half-naked, right before her eyes! His son Prakash had turned beet red with embarrassment and then quickly scrambled to make excuses for him, 'My father ... you see, my father isn't quite... he's the philosophical type ... you know what I mean.' His wife was clever enough to smile and nod her head, as if to say, of course, there was no question, she understood completely. My story begins when Durlabha was already advanced in years. He had retired from his job and had come back with his wife to Orissa, the land of his birth, to spend the rest of his days in peace and quiet. They settled in Bhubaneshwar.

This is the time of life when most people are content to look back over their long years and savour their memories. But not Durlabha; in an act that could only be considered a crowning example of his forgetfulness, Durlabha would chase away even the slightest wisp of a memory as soon as it floated across his mind. And the more forgetful he became, the more restless he seemed to grow, until he could no longer resist an irrational urge to flee from his house. Of course, he would come back each time, but his wife Kunjalata, better known as Lattidei, couldn't help worrying that one day he might just go and never come back; who could predict? If he had taken to religion and become a holy man, I would have happily joined him; but he was never religious like me. When we were younger, just for my sake he would stand in front of the gods with hands folded in prayer, but nowadays he doesn't even bother to do that. It would even have been better if he had taken to visiting somewhere or the other, sitting in someone's house and chatting for part of the day. But he doesn't do

that, either. He just follows me around as I do my housework, sometimes putting in his two bits about this or that, but most of the time just absorbed in his own thoughts. He is the same as he always was; his mind always seemed to be somewhere else, and it's no different now. He'll sit and stare into space for hours on end and then he'll jump up suddenly, as if a red ant has just stung him; he'll pace from one end of the veranda to the other, his loud steps echoing through the house, and finally he takes off. What's got into him? Is he really ...?

Lattidei's suspicion was natural. But you can see my problem, too, can't you? It would have been easy to joke about the absent-mindedness of a youthful or even a middle-aged Durlabha, but what can I write about the absent-mindedness of the old man Durlabha? And the hope that something interesting will happen is a vain hope at best; after all, the old man is far removed from everyday activities; he doesn't bother himself with anything that goes on around him; important or trivial, it doesn't matter. He doesn't have anything to do with anyone. Even a flashback, a glimpse into his past, wouldn't help me much. I have already told you, haven't I, that he is quick to chase away any shadow of a memory that falls on him. And since he seems so determined to forget his unwanted past, whether the past of yesterday or of years ago, who am I to dredge it up and spin a tale out of it simply for my own amusement?

That hasn't stopped me, of course. I write at the risk of boring you. I seem compelled to write. Why? Because there isn't anyone else around to show compassion for Lattidei. Things have come to such a pass for her. Her husband is in this sort of condition, and she talks to no one about it; she doesn't want to talk to anyone about it. After all, she has her pride. Which is another way of saying that she feels it's nobody's business. I'll look after my own husband. He (read I) doesn't need your false pity. That's Lattidei for you. And so, except for a sympathetic writer, who could possibly suffer with her, share her pain?

It's all up to me. I have to take Lattidei's side and try to understand the highways and byways, the whys and wherefores of the old man

Durlabha's thoughts. I have seen how he stares into space and then closes his eyes, only to open them suddenly as if something has made him angry, as if someone has ordered him to stop whatever he is doing; but he is not one to be so easily cowed. The world around him can't make him dance to its tune. If he feels like it he'll go ahead and stare at the blazing sun; he'll stare and stare at it until he melts right into it and all that's left is the blazing sun, no more Durlabha. Who's going to stop me? Why should they stop me? In the same way, he'll stare at the hollow in a tree trunk and at the black ants in the hollow of the tree trunk; at the clouds in the mottled sky, as if counting them one by one; he'll watch the doves in their gentle coupling or the barnyard fowl pecking each other in their more rough-and-tumble acts of sex; he'll focus his gaze on the perfectly commonplace pictures of some calendar and, though there's nothing special to be seen in them, become totally absorbed, laughing to himself, closing his eyes and then suddenly coming to with a start. On occasion, that's the sign, the first indication that it's about to begin, first the pacing back and forth and then, without further warning, the vanishing act. I have to admit that I wasn't altogether without fear for him myself, but I never wanted to poke holes in Lattidei's self-assurance. As she lay tossing in bed, unable to sleep, I would be by her side, invisible of course, whispering in her ear, 'Sleep. Everything will be okay. Even if you don't do anything. Because you are the kind of woman the sacred texts mean when they say in their prayers, "You are the power that animates all of life."'

Nowadays there's no occasion for Durlabha's friends or relatives to tease him about his strange habits; Durlabha has withdrawn completely from their society. There's only Lattidei left, but she has come to realize that it wouldn't be wise to say anything to her husband about his absent-mindedness.

Not that anything she does or doesn't do would stop Durlabha, anyway. He suddenly interrupts his reverie and opens his eyes as wide as he can. If he finds Lattidei in his range of sight, he glares at her, full

of silent rage. When she's not around, his anger subsides by itself. The meaning of his stare seems to be something like this: Think what you want. I don't care. You're just an ordinary woman; how could you understand what's in my mind? I'm no different from what I always was; it's just that my thoughts have now climbed even higher; my meditations have plumbed depths even more profound. I spit on the foolishness of the life I've lived. What I am seeking is the sprout of Absolute Emptiness. What I am seeking is nothing less than Real Meaning. Truth. Do you understand? I'm asking you, do you understand?

It's hopeless. I knew you would never understand. I knew you would just think I have lost my mind completely, the way a person can have a disease from childhood that starts out mild but with time spreads beyond control. I know that's why you run after me every time I leave the house.

Why do you keep watch over me like that? Do you think I'll run away somewhere? Or just vanish into thin air?

The truth is that things had reached such a state that Lattidei didn't leave her husband alone any more. Although she was crippled with arthritis and couldn't see as well as she used to, as soon as she saw her husband bolt through the door, she followed him, close on his heels. If he got too much of a lead on her, she would break into a run. By now, the residents of the colony of Ahalyanagar, situated on the outskirts of the ancient city of Bhubaneshwar, had come to expect to be entertained by the amusing spectacle of the old lady running after her old man.

It wasn't the sight of the hero of this little dramatic piece that they found so interesting; a skinny old bald man out for a stroll or going about some errand or other, well, there was nothing special about that. But what in the world possessed the old woman, who was running after him with such speed? As she got closer to them and they could see her better, their curiosity would be tinged with the colour of a different emotion: jealousy. You have guessed it right: for the most part, the spectators were some of the more distinguished matrons of the neighbourhood, the likes of Sudha Patnaik, Priti Panda, Namita Sarkar, and Vaijayanti Vishavala, to name but a few.

You see, it wouldn't have taken a man more than one look to realize that the old woman had been a great beauty in her day. Who cared if she couldn't see as well as she used to? Her eyes were still so clear and limpid and her glance was still so penetrating that you couldn't help but be afraid that she would see right through you, right down to all your foibles and flaws. But, despite that fear, you would never run from her; you would be like the thief who is inexorably drawn to the police officer pursuing him. Such, I suppose, is the way of all things; how else can you explain the behaviour of the moth that flies right into the flame that will burn it up? What's more, not only would you not flee from such a glance; you would be consumed by the desire to possess it. I mean, to possess its secrets, to know what it would say to you. Will that lady with the lovely eyes smile for me? Will that lady with the lovely eyes weep for me? And yet you wouldn't be able to suppress the feeling that such clear eyes would never stay fixed on any one object for long. Then, again, you would tell yourself, a lake high in the Himalayan mountains is still a lake; it's not made entirely of ice. And so it was that men were not simply attracted to those eyes; they couldn't tear themselves away from them. That they would soon find themselves disappointed and have to struggle to free themselves from their spell, well, that is another story altogether. Their first real acquaintance with beauty was those unbearably lovely eyes and the overwhelming desire they felt to fathom the depths of the emotions that welled up within them. But it was not just her eyes; there was also the pure glow of her delicate body, hardly five feet tall. Even now, you might think that not a single wrinkle marred the old woman's fair skin. Of course, you would be mistaken. She had her share of old-age lines on her forehead, and in deference to her years the corners of her eyes displayed delicate crow's feet. But you would never have the feeling that any of this detracted from her beauty. If you looked carefully enough, of course, you would see those lines on her forehead, but they looked more like the traces left by a steady wind on white sand, like so many gentle kisses. There was no sweat in the creases of her

forehead, just a bright glistening. You remember I said that her body had a glow to it. Like that. And even if you set all of this aside for a minute and just looked at the rest of her, at her too tiny nose, her too broad chest, and her thick hair, coarse like jute, no one would dare say that any of it was unattractive. Who would stop to ask about a few numbers that don't quite add up? I mean, what man would, anyway?

But, alas, it also wouldn't have taken a woman any more time than that to come to the conclusion that the old lady was a tough and strong-willed character. She was the kind of woman who could get a man under her thumb and keep him there. Women didn't take much notice of what was pretty or not pretty about her; God only knows what led them to their conclusions. In any case, it was only to be expected that the matrons of Ahalyanagar didn't particularly care for the way Lattidei was running after her husband. One of them could even be heard shouting after her, 'See, didn't I tell you? She won't let her man out of her sight, not even for a second. It's as if she's afraid someone's going to run off with the old goat!' And they would all burst out laughing.

For the most part, the residents of Ahalyanagar had never found either Durlabha or Lattidei worthy of their neighbourly affection. As far as they were concerned, both husband and wife had blown in from somewhere else, from Delhi or Bombay or some other place. Although theirs was an Oriya name, they didn't seem to consider themselves Oriya and kept aloof from everyone else in the colony. They acted as if they thought they were better than their neighbours. And so in the eyes of the matrons of Ahalyanagar, the once beautiful, arthritic old Mrs D.N. Das (as the nameplate on their door proclaimed) was guilty of a host of sins. I'll admit that it's entirely possible that even if they, or at least if Priti Panda and Sudha Patnaik, had taken a more easy-going attitude towards her, the end of my story would still have been the same. But never mind that now. More about that later.

I have to tell you that no matter how angry he was with her, Durlabha never told his wife in so many words, 'Listen, I'm warning you. Don't follow me wherever I go.' He figured that she wouldn't

listen to him anyway. Does she ever listen to me? No, all she does is get on her high horse and start lecturing me, as if she were the better educated one, as if she were the smarter one, the older one. She takes every opportunity to let me know that my memory is failing, that I am going deaf and can't see very well, that all in all I've become an old man. And, given the fact that I've been absent-minded from the beginning, she tells me, it's not surprising that I'm now in a state of total mental confusion. And so there's nothing at all to be worried about. I have to hand it to her. That's some display of logic. But I don't need it. I don't need to hear her lectures. She can save her long rambling speeches for her children; she can write them long-drawn-out letters. No one's better than I am at writing. I stood first in essay writing in my BA exams (see how well I can still remember?). But I admit defeat. I can't stand to listen to her childish lectures, the way she gets all upset and harangues me. Let her run after me. What do I care? Such was the train of thought that finally led Durlabha to stop trying to prevent his wife from running after him; indeed, it made him feel that there was nothing he could do but let her go on following him wherever he went.

This was the state of affairs one evening when Durlabha, exhausted, sat down to rest in an open field opposite the post office and Lattidei found herself with no choice but to sit down next to him. Who can say exactly what pleasure she felt in the things she now saw before her, the grass of the open field; the swelling disc of the sun, which seemed close enough to touch; the carefree play of a little girl; the tug of war of the squirrel with a big gnarled root. Who can say exactly what it was in all of this that made her turn to her husband and venture a smile. And not only that. The very thing that Durlabha had been afraid would happen, happened. Ignoring the stony expression on her husband's face, she started to speak to him. In the very tone that you would use to bring a sulking child to his senses.

'I know you're mad at me. Mad that wherever you go I follow you (a nervous giggle). It's not that I don't trust you. I'm just afraid that

you'll wander off somewhere, that you'll do something ... You see, we've grown old. Both of us. You're an old man, and I am an old woman. We're both at a ripe old age now. Isn't that right?'

(From the way she said this, you would have thought she had said, 'We've grown younger. Both of us. You're a young man and I'm a young girl now. Isn't that right?')

'And we have no one. We're all alone. Just the two of us.'

(As if she were saying, 'And all these days we've just been waiting for this joy.')

'We've come home in name only. We have no one here. Our parents died long ago, and our children are scattered. Our friends are all old now; they've either taken to their beds with their aches and pains or they sit and doze in their armchairs. A few of them might be here, but we never get to see them. As for our neighbours, they can't stand us. But I'm not unhappy. That's the way we wanted it, isn't it? That's what you wanted. What do you say?'

(Durlabha said to himself, 'If that's what you wanted, that's what I wanted too; that's what we wanted. Did I ever go against your wishes?')

'We could have moved in with one of our children. We could have moved in with Prakash, if no one else. But you said no. You said you wanted to go back to your birthplace. So we came back, not to the village and not to the swarm of our relatives in Cuttack. You insisted that you wanted to be alone, that you didn't want any ties with anyone. That was why we rented this house here, on the outskirts of the capital. That was fine.'

(This time she was aware of Durlabha's answer. He nodded his head for her to see. As if to say, 'Of course it was fine. To hell with all the others. I'm different from everyone else; I'm not like them.')

'But we've grown old. And we're only going to grow older. There is someone here with us, though. It's the Lord Shiva, the one known as the Lingaraja. And it isn't just Shiva who's here for us; there are thousands of others, all His friends and associates, all the members of His extended family.' (Another giggle.)

Durlabha kept listening, although he didn't open his mouth. But she noticed that he was listening, and this was enough for Lattidei; her chest swelled in pride at the thought that he was paying such close attention to what she was saying. And that was not all; she was sure that her eyes could not possibly be deceiving her. He's not just listening to me, she thought. He knows I'm right. That dismissive expression he usually has on his face is slowly disappearing. In a few seconds, there won't be a trace of it left.

In fact, for a few minutes Durlabha did think that he was enjoying himself, leaving aside the question of whether such a feeling can be equated with a sensation of real happiness. There was nothing new about Lattidei lecturing him, but there was something in her manner today that had less of the schoolmarm and more of a sense of urgency, of pleading. She's not just trying to make excuses for herself, trying to explain to me why she keeps such a close watch on me. It could even be that she thinks I have lost my mind and she's trying to let me know in a kind way that that's what she thinks. But that's not all of it. She also feels lonely. She's finally come to understand that we have no one, starting with our children, to our neighbours, right down to this whole world and everyone in it. It's all false. Everything is false. She's finally come to see that. She's also unhappy ... maybe even unhappier than I am. That's why she needs me; she wants to hold my hand so that we can share our pain and suffering. That's really why she runs after me all the time.

But what's that? All of a sudden Durlabha's brows knit into a frown again. But this time he seemed to be frowning not in anger but in pain. It was as if Lattidei had unexpectedly delivered him a crushing blow.

It happened just at the moment when Durlabha heard her say, 'There is someone here for us. It's the Lord Shiva. And it isn't just Shiva who's here for us; there are thousands of others ...' Meaning, you're not the only one watching and following me; you have your grandfather with you. And not just him, either, thousands of others. They are all around me; they won't leave me in peace. Is that why you

agreed to live in Bhubaneshwar, because the long arm of your Lord is even longer here? And it would be that much easier for you to torment me? Durlabha's frown seemed only to get deeper. It showed no sign of fading.

Lattidei was at a loss. What had happened? Oh God, Oh Lingaraja, did I say anything wrong?

Reader, be patient. One day, Durlabha will indeed burst out laughing. And you will see who is at a loss then. But forgive me; I've given away the climax of my story.

It's not really necessary to describe the terrible silence that engulfed the remainder of that day. Even their normal conversation about household matters, as one-sided as it was (Lattidei would express her opinion and Durlabha would grunt in approval), ceased. Not a word came from Lattidei's mouth, no opinion, no question. She didn't even comment about how the servant was acting uppity and talking back; she didn't remark how her neighbour, Mrs Patnaik, would attempt to belt out a song when no one else was home; she didn't even complain that the children hadn't written for a long time; she didn't ask if he had sent some money for his granddaughter's birthday. And Durlabha kept his questions to himself, questions he had been asking out of habit for as long as he could remember: 'How is the pain in your knees these days? Are you taking your medicine regularly?' All left unasked.

It's no wonder that as they stopped talking, their thoughts about each other only became fiercer, more furious. Durlabha retreated to his study. He put his feet up on the table and stared through the window at the champak tree. He wasn't interested in wondering about this big tree, with its veritable forest of leaves and delicate new blossoms, one of which had become detached from its stem and was nestled in the thick bed of leaves. He wasn't interested in translating the sounds and sights of nature. In one fell swoop, he summoned before him all the people who had been close to him throughout the years of his life and he upbraided them all. As if he wanted to tell them, 'There's no need

for stealth any more; there's no need for any of you to try to worm your way inside my head. Today I'll call you before me and tell you exactly what I'm thinking. I'll call each and every one of you to me, one by one, and I'll say to you, "You are all false. Totally false. You, Latti, and your children. Your friends and your relatives and my friends and my relatives. Bogus. False. Every last one of you." Latti, our love for each other was also false. Put thousands of fights and arguments into the same pot with thousands of moments of tenderness, thousands of acts of sex. Mix them all together and what do you have—an unusual stew, to say the least. How could you dare to say that I love you or that you love me? We've lived together for fifty years, and we've grown accustomed to each other, I'll admit. But is that what you would call love? And, as for your children—Nilima, Surama, Prasanna, Prema, Prakash—not one of them is really my child. Just because they've sprung from my loins, does that mean I have to call them my own? Did anyone of them give form to a single one of my dreams? A single one of my heart's longings? That Nilima, who once used to sit in my lap and poke fun at the rabbit in the moon, saying, "Mr Rabbit in the Moon, Oh Mr Rabbit in the Moon, why do you have such big floppy ears? Why don't you come down here?" and then burst into laughter, now sits there primly with her friends, all society ladies, and smiles her false smiles, her polite smiles, her lipstick-y smiles. As soon as she comes into the house, she plays the officious mistress, ordering this one to do that and that one to do this. And Surama? Once it seemed that she would devour every book in existence. She flipped through page after page of the encyclopaedia and drove me to distraction with her questions. Now all she devours is candies and cakes. She's as fat as can be. And in her spare time she reads movie magazines to find out which star is carrying on a secret love affair and with whom. Prema was a timid one; she felt sorry for tiny kittens, for the cockroach that was crushed underfoot, and for the lizards who had lost their tails. She would cry for them. I used to think that she would progress from there, that one day she'd cry for people who are suffering and not just

for these small animals. But now I see that she's become like all the rest; she's joined the ranks of unemployed females. Once she clung to her father in real terror. Now she pretends to her husband that she's a delicate and sensitive creature. "Did you hear about the boat that capsized? So many people died. They drowned in the ocean. Couldn't someone have saved them? Oh, it's just so sad." Lips slightly open. Eyes cast down. A first-class pose! As for the boys, you needn't even bother to ask about them. When Prakash was in college, he gave a lecture on dishonesty. Now he says that in business you can't survive if you're honest. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, he says, and you have to counter your opponents' cheating with your own. Like Russia and the US. That's my son, the big man, his mother's special favourite. And Prasanna? He has become an officer in the army. He is quiet like his father, but he doesn't want to discuss anything with me. He acts as if he's privy to top government secrets; if he were to divulge them, who knows what the consequences would be. The truth is that he doesn't think at all; he's totally empty-headed.

'They're all the same now, all of them; they've let themselves blend into the deceptive world in which they live. Not a single one is honest and truthful. Which of them would I call my own?

'I'm not honest either. I've also brutally strangled my own truths in an effort to fit in with the people around me. You see, I was afraid that they wouldn't consider me normal. But I thought that at least my own children ... Never mind. What's the use? Now I don't care any more, I don't care what anyone thinks. I have no more responsibilities to anyone in this world. And as my physical appetites have relinquished their hold on me, my intellectual powers have grown sharper and sharper. The old man sees everything; he sees right through everything to the real truth. Now do you understand?

'If I look back, my head reels; if I look ahead, there's nothing but darkness. That's why I've decided to chase away the memories; that's why I've decided to push aside the future. I've decided to withdraw even further from people. The only company I'll keep is with trees

and leaves, with the animals, with the sun and the moon. And I'll ask my questions. I'll continue my search for true meaning. Alone, absolutely alone. If you call that crazy, fine, I'll be crazy. You and your God can't touch me. You want to keep watch over me, spy on my every move? Go ahead. Watch me all you want.'

As if stirred to action by his rambling thoughts, Durlabha suddenly got up and went outside. But as he left he called to Lattidei, 'I'm going out for a bit. If you feel like it, you're welcome to trail after me.' To himself, he said, 'I can be as stubborn as you. I'm your match, don't forget! Whatever you say, I'm going out now. If this is the way you want it, I'll tell you, I mean I'll tell my jailer, whenever I go. You'll see you can't do anything to change me.'

Lattidei didn't run after him. She kept her eye on him, though, from where she sat on the porch. She saw that once her husband reached the road, he didn't assume his usual brisk pace. He seemed to be confused in the moonlight, uncertain of which way to go. He'd walk a bit in one direction and then retrace his steps. Finally, he sat down at the foot of a statue of some hero, not far from the house. He turned his head, and with mouth wide open he stared at the sky, as if he were waiting for manna to fall from heaven into his gaping mouth, as if that would put an end to his suffering! Oh Lingaraja, what has happened to me? Oh Lingaraja, why has this happened?

Lattidei quickly went over in her mind everything that had ever happened between them, everything that she had said and done to him. From the day they had been married right up until the present moment. And time and time again she came to the same conclusion, 'There's no reason for him to torment me like this. He's got no reason to treat me this way.' She thought to herself, 'All my life I've tried to make you happy. I gave you my beauty, my youth, my strength, my life. I've given you everything I had. When you strayed from the path, clinging to the petticoat of some other woman, I brought you back. And you thanked me for it; you thanked me plenty. You told me that without me you would never be able to control your wandering

thoughts; they'd lead you to some godforsaken place. But now that we are on the last stages of our journey, where have you gone and what have you done? I always said that you're crazy. Maybe I was right.

'And then there's the question of our family. I gave you three daughters and two sons. There's nothing wrong with any of them. Our two sons have good jobs; for that matter so do our sons-in-law. Indeed, people would consider at least two of our sons-in-law to be rich and important men. You yourself had a government job and managed to put away some savings. We don't have to be beholden to any of our children, and they're not dependent on us, either. But all our children love us and want to have us with them; they make excuses for your eccentricities; in fact they blame me for everything. But you insisted on being alone; you insisted on living apart from them. At first, I thought, that's fine. It will be like a second honeymoon for us. I won't let my old man go now. I'll take him by the hand and guide him gently to our final destination. But nothing's turned out the way I had hoped. Who knows why?'

Lattidei cut her musings short to think about the way her husband had fled from the house again and what he had said to her. She was now convinced that the moonlight must have made him a true lunatic; he was just sitting there gaping at the sky. In her growing agitation, she cried, 'I've failed. Oh Lingaraja, have I really failed this time? No! It can't be. You won't let me lose. If my husband is my lord and master, then you are his lord and master. You'll hear my cry! You've got to hear my cry! I won't let you rest until you give him some peace of mind. I won't give you any peace until then. You know how stubborn I can be. I won't let you rest until I see him smile and laugh again ...'

In a way, it was a good thing that his bitterness and her agitation had risen to this height. You see, now the only thing left for them to do was to wane; they couldn't go any higher. What goes up must come down. It's the law of nature.

And that is exactly what happened. Lattidei took refuge in her God, Lingaraja. For Lattidei, the God Lingaraja didn't live only in the

famous medieval temple in Bhubaneshwar called the Lingaraja, in the form of the temple's main icon, which the sacred texts tell us is Shiva himself. In fact, the city of Bhubaneshwar is filled with temples, some almost falling down but all very much alive. To Lattidei, all the gods in all the temples were also the God Lingaraja. She considered all the various gods to be forms of the one Great God, Shiva. Don't think that she had worked out her idiosyncratic theology just because the Lingaraja temple was a bit far away and her arthritis was too painful to allow her to make the trip very often. That wasn't quite how it happened. The truth is more like this. Since they had moved to Bhubaneshwar, Lattidei had become painfully aware that her husband's behaviour was getting stranger and stranger by the minute. In her desperation, she was ready to find God anywhere and everywhere she looked. All she had to do was catch sight of the white flag of some temple blowing in the wind and she would fold her hands in supplication. If she chanced upon some temple, she'd stop to pray. Not just a perfunctory stop; she'd take her time and stand there, head bowed, for a good two or three minutes. But she found the plethora of gods' names confusing. And so she called them all Lingaraja. That was, after all, the name for which Bhubaneshwar was famous. You might even say that Lingaraja was the first, the original occupant of the ancient city of Bhubaneshwar. Without His compassionate watch over her, Lattidei was convinced she would never find happiness in her last days in Bhubaneshwar. And that was why, although she had her own private shrine in her house with images of different gods and goddesses, when she finished worshipping them all, she would let out a deep sigh and call out, 'Oh Lingaraja!'

Now, after her agitation had reached such a peak, after she had said to Lingaraja, 'You know how stubborn I can be,' Lattidei began to spend all her time either with her gods at home or visiting the many temples of the city. She was so intent on carrying out her promise or threat to give Lingaraja no peace that she had no time to keep up her usual practice of following her husband wherever he went. One might

even say that she began to grow a bit lax in her self-assumed duties as a guard.

She grew even more lax in her duties when she discovered the temple Supteshvara, the temple of the Sleeping God. It's hard to pinpoint what there was about the linga in this neglected temple that made such an impression on her. Perhaps it was the whole atmosphere of the place, with its rank vegetation, thick strands of trees, dank darkness, and profound silence, which convinced Lattidei that Lingaraja had deliberately chosen this place to hide. She could feel it; he's hiding from me, just from me. Because I've said that I am going to look for him and that I'll find him, no matter what it takes. When she first visited the temple, there was no priest around. She brought water to bathe the linga and then drank some of the water that she had offered. She even named the god herself. 'Lingaraja, you are my Supteshvara, my Sleeping God. I'm going to come to you every day. I'm going to keep coming, time and time again. I'm going to wake you up. I'm going to rouse you from your slumber. You'll have to look me straight in the eye and tell me whether I'm going to get my husband back. He seems so full of anger; if I lose him, if he gets away from me now, where will he go? He can't have long to live. Won't he ever be well again, won't he ever smile again, won't he ever laugh with me the way he used to?'

In the meantime, Durlabha was as stubborn as ever. Whenever he went out he would be sure to tell his wife, almost as a taunt, 'I'm going towards the park,' or 'I'm going towards the hospital,' or 'I'm going towards Kedaragauri.' He would tell her the general direction in which he was headed; she could figure out the details for herself.

At first, he was surprised when Lattidei made no effort to follow him. But this also gave him some sense of satisfaction, as he thought to himself, 'This was bound to happen. She's just a woman, after all. My anger and stubbornness finally got to her. At last!'

But he felt a bit differently when he realized that the real reason why Lattidei was not so eager to run after him any more was that she

had found something else to absorb her time. She was too busy running to see her gods, particularly some 'Sleeping God' (where did she dig that one up?), to run after her husband.

Silently, Durlabha railed at her, 'To hell with all your nonsense. No Sleeping God or Hidden God or what have you can save me. Do you understand? All the trouble in this world can be traced back to those gods of yours. They're the root of all evil. And why is that? Because people bow before those gods and think that one bow frees them from all their sins. They see everything they've done wrong, and then they just shut their eyes to it. I have nothing but contempt for your gods, even greater contempt than I have for people! But whatever's happened, at least now I'm free. I'm totally free. Liberated.' Durlabha revelled in this thought. 'There's nothing to tie me down, nothing to chain me up. I can go wherever I want. No one knows me here. I'll go home when I feel like it and not a minute before. And maybe one day I won't go back at all.'

But, if the truth be known, even with this new-found sense of freedom Durlabha didn't get very far. The first problem was that he wasn't able to suppress his hunger. He didn't dare eat anything from a store in the bazaar; he didn't want to get sick, after all. And so he had no choice but to go home. The other thing was that he couldn't get rid of other people altogether. No matter where he went, there was someone there. Some cyclist, some middle-class office worker dressed in a suit, the laughter of some college girl, some little boy in short pants; they would all remind him ... remind him of the past ... of the chaos of the past. All the laughter, all the tears, all the talk ... all the efforts to cover up the selfish fights fought ... and all the players. It was as if Latti, Nilima, Surama, Prema, Prakash, Prasanna, Gadadhara, Gagana, Mr Rama, Mrs ... damn it! It was as if they were all keeping watch over him; he was surrounded on all sides. They wouldn't even make way for him. He could hear them saying, 'How long can you stare at the sky? At some point you'll have to come back to earth, you know. And you'll have to look at us, you'll have to smell our putrid odours. It's your stink, too, don't you understand?'

But Durlabha kept up his wanderings, his search for some quiet place, some deserted place. Where there would be no people, absolutely no people.

In the end, he found his place. It was also a temple of some kind, but it was in ruins. There was no image or linga or anything there. It was really no more than a heap of stones in the midst of a jungle. No one's shadow even falls on this place. Fine. That's just what I have been looking for. This will be my refuge. I'll sit here. I'll rest my weary bones. I'll let myself quietly disappear into this place. As if to poke fun at Lattidei, he gave the place a name. He called it Lupteshvara, the 'Vanished God'. God has vanished, and his hangers-on are finished. There's only me left. Here I can shed my human skin, leave behind my mortal integuments. And once I've done that, well, you'll see what I'll do then ...

He began to frequent the place. One day, after he had explored every corner in that jungle of stones, he made a terrifying discovery. A human being of stone! A human being carved out of stone. Eyes, nose, breasts, hips ...

Durlabha screamed, as if a sharp pain had suddenly awakened him from a deep sleep.

He raised his hands to cover his eyes. Even in the dim light that filtered into the innermost recesses of the temple and with his weak eyesight, he could see that there was not just one stone figure. There were many. There were many people there. What good was it to raise his hands to cover his eyes? They would only take his hands away and say, 'Look. Keep looking. Then maybe you'll understand. How cold, how dead, this body is.'

Durlabha didn't move. Anyone else might have marvelled at the sculptor's skill. But Durlabha had just seen all of mankind perish. They couldn't possibly be so treacherous, so evil that they would return from the dead. They've become stone. They're cold now. And they've been lying in wait for me all this time, to wake me up to this reality. That one day I will be just like them. That you can't wish away all the

things that did and didn't happen in your life; you can't just wish away all your unfinished dreams, all the lies you spun out of weakness and guilt; you can't wish away your unspoken sins, your deceitful pretending not to know what was going on and looking the other way; you can't just wish away the cruelty of not being able to help; you can't wish away any of these things, no matter how uneasy they make you with the stench of their existence. You think that when you die all trace of these things will vanish with the wind. But it won't happen that way. There's no chance. Something else has to happen.

You can't just leave life behind you. You have to live it.

No! Durlabha fled from the cave-like interior of the temple. He sat outside, looking up at the top of a banyan tree, up and up, as high as his eyes would go. He told himself, 'There's nothing to be afraid of. There's no one here to see me, to think the old man's gone nuts. I'm completely free now. No, no, nothing's happened.' He moved away from the base of the tree and looked up at the sky; he stared so hard that his eyes began to smart.

He had the sensation that Lattidei was standing by his side. He could hear her say, 'Don't worry. There's nothing to worry about. I'm here. I'm not cold. I'm warm. I'm moving, living. All these fifty long years I've been here for you. I was made just for you.'

(You don't have to pretend. I know exactly who you are. You're just an ordinary average woman, nothing more. Don't think that you can save me.)

'Yes, yes. I will admit it. I'm perfectly ordinary. I'm just as full of jealousy and anger as the next one; I'm as quick to quarrel and argue as the next one. And I lie as much as the next one. But that's not all. My love is just as strong as theirs too. Didn't I tell you two days after we were married, as I lay stretched across your chest, don't you remember? I told you that I would never leave you. I'd never ever leave you. That is my love. My never leaving you.'

(Thank you, thank you. I know all about your never leaving me, your never letting me be free.)

'Yes, you know, but you forget. That's your problem. You forget that in the end if a person has no one to cling to he is lost. Sad to say, you never could find refuge in God. But I'm here. I'm not just a human being. I'm your wife, your beloved, your lover, your mate, the woman who shares your life!'

(Goddess, witch.)

'That's fine. I'm a Goddess. A witch. But at least I'm something, someone.'

The conversation stopped. Durlabha realized that in fact Latti wasn't there. Latti has stopped following me. She cares more about her Lingaraja.

With that thought, Durlabha became angry. He became her husband again. Never mind what he had or hadn't told her when he left the house; he couldn't even remember. But he shook his finger at his absent wife as he shouted, 'I told you. I distinctly remember that I told you, "Go ahead and go to your Sleeping God, I'm going to my Vanished God. It's not even two furlongs from your temple. It's on the left-hand side of the street. There's a huge banyan tree and nothing else. No one ever goes there."

'I distinctly remember that I told you, "On the way back from your temple, stop there. We can go home together."

'I distinctly remember that I told you. But there's no sign of you. Didn't it occur to you even once to come and pick me up here?'

Who knows whether in the heat of his anger he would have stormed back home and confronted his wife with a shower of abuse, or decided not to go home at all and wandered around the city aimlessly. It's hard to say, because in the meantime Lattidei grew worried because he was so late and went out to look for him.

If they had met in some lonely, distant field as the sun was setting, the dignity and drama of the moment might have been preserved. But that was not to be. Durlabha didn't go straight home. He stopped just short of the house. In full view of Priti Panda, who was taking a stroll in her garden, and Sudha Patnaik, who was fussing with her hair. And

so they got to see the whole thing. Durlabha spoke first. 'Where have you been all this time? I distinctly remember that I told you—'

It had been a long time since Lattidei had heard her husband yell at her like this. But that wasn't the only thing that won her over. She could also see a strange light that brightened her husband's face. 'His face lit up as soon as he saw me,' she thought. 'Before that, he looked like a ghost. Dirty sweat was dripping from his face, and his restless eyes were looking for someone.'

Maybe that was why she told him a lie. 'Yes, yes. You told me, but I forgot.'

'You forgot? You forget things, too?'

With that, Durlabha burst out laughing. He laughed so loudly that both Priti Panda and Sudha Patnaik could do nothing but stare at him in astonishment. But neither husband nor wife paid any attention to them. As the laughter rippled on, Durlabha said, 'You're just like me. You've also lost your mind. Now do you understand?'

For the first time, Lattidei felt she could understand what it meant to cry tears of joy. And in the midst of her tears she silently whispered these words of thanks, 'God Lingaraja has heard my prayers. Finally, after all these days.'

We can ignore the sarcastic titters of the toothy Sudha Patnaik and the skinny Priti Panda. There's time yet before they grow old. Anyway, neither of them is such a beauty that they can dare hope to feel any greater love from their husbands.

The Journey

I got it into my head that I wanted to go to the temple, I just got it into my head. So, you find it strange that Manavendra Mohanty, the great intellectual who prided himself in not believing in all sorts of rubbish like religion, should suddenly become obsessed with going to the temple? Men get things into their heads, don't you know, develop desires, even when they've got wives, sons, and daughters. So, why not me too? Maybe a desire for a woman might be some kind of sin in your book, but surely there's no sin in wanting to go to the temple? Atheists, like Marxists, make a big fuss about calling religion a bunch of lies. I did, too, once. But really, have you ever heard of anyone calling it a sin, something so wicked that it demands punishment? So I think I'll just go ahead and do what I want. I'll do something religious.

They'll laugh. Let them.

I'll step out of their stinking murky truth, into falsehood, pure and odourless.

I'll seek and rise, seek and rise some more, higher and higher, and once I've seen God at the top, I'll shout, 'I found it.'

Once I've attained that pure bliss, there won't be any truth, any falsehood. There won't be anything like sin or merit, transgressions or violations, no masters, no servants, no wives, no children—nothing like that to worry about, nothing to fret over.

I'm going. I'm going ... but, well, what about the monkeys that are always there?

(They all laugh.)

Oh, I see. You think I'll be afraid because there are monkeys there. So what? Should I stop myself from going just because of that? Isn't this my temple, right here in the city where I've lived ever since I was a child, right here in Gajanga, where I made my life, made my name, grew up, and

grew old .... And still I never went there. You don't have to believe in God if you go to the temple, but still I never went. I never even went as a tourist, just to see the place. I never even went just to satisfy my curiosity. Why? Because the place is infested with monkeys. Never mind, I'll go today. I'll do something that I have never done in my entire life. I feel like it. I just got it into my head that I want to go to the temple.

If I see a monkey, I can close my eyes.

If I see a monkey, I'll close my eyes. No, no, don't come near me!

There. I stopped them. I stopped them dead in their tracks. Without a word to anyone, I set off. I didn't take a walking stick or an umbrella with me.

I decided that I wouldn't take a back road or a quiet lane; I'd go straight out of the front door and take the main road. I'd keep walking down that main road right smack into the centre of the city. From there, I'd be able to see the mountain. And the temple on top of the mountain. Even the flags on top of the temple. I'd be wild with anticipation. I'd run from step to step, up the mountain. I wouldn't look back. I wouldn't so much as cast a glance at the rows of beggars lining the stairs, all the hunchbacks and lepers. I wouldn't say a word to the grinning face at the store that sells offerings. I wouldn't even ask about the red, dripping tongues of the Brahman priests. And I wouldn't so much as look down at what was at the foot of the staircase, at the jungle of humanity at the bottom. Not even to see if the wild hairy creatures were snarling at me, ready to lunge ... Ma, Ma!

I won't be able to grab onto my mother. There'll be no one there.

So what if there's no one there. My mind is blank. An old man's memories of childhood are not history; they're more like prehistory. The dividing line is a mist, an ashen grey, that separates life's beginning from some inchoate darkness. No, I don't remember anything about the temple. I've never been to the temple, not ever.

And so I left. I headed for the main road, and I started to walk, all by myself, straight ahead.

Oh God ... It's hot. I should have brought an umbrella.

Who needs an umbrella? At least I have sandals on my feet. That's good enough.

I told myself that Manavendra Mohanty was not out for any ordinary stroll. He was about to do something he had never done before, not in his entire life. If he was to succeed, it would take some extra doing. In this very walk, in just an hour or two, he would bring to completion everything that he had tried to accomplish throughout his life. He would have to goad himself, force himself not to quit ... I'll make it; I'll reach my goal as long as I can keep myself energized, keep myself focussed and moving, to the point where I can truly feel the pain of trudging through the unbearable, burning, midday heat. I won't look at anybody. I won't listen to anybody. I won't waver. I won't stray: no, no, I'll keep going, keep racing, until I've hit my mark.

I quickened my steps; I was practically running. All I kept thinking of was how to get to the end of the road and begin my climb up the mountain.

There was some kind of a demonstration in front of the Hanuman Shoe Store. Why was their leader, the one making the speech, pointing his finger at me? Am I one of his enemies? Never mind. I won't look that way. His father might even be one of my friends. Maybe we were fellow students or we might have worked together. At least, we must have sat together on the same bench in some office or at the bank or while waiting to see the doctor; we were probably pressed right up against each other, our bodies touching. And what about the man who owns the store, the one they keep shouting about, 'Down with him. down with him!' He is probably a friend of mine, too. I know all the bald men, all the white-haired men in this town; they are all my friends, all my soulmates. I know I'm just one of the old rats that have been prowling these streets forever. Never mind. I looked away. I kept walking.

Maybe the speaker was pointing his finger at me and maybe not; who cares? But I was sure that one of the men in the crowd listening

to the speech would give a yawn and look out into the street for a second and recognize me. And when he did, he'd be surprised. Now where, he'd think to himself, is old Manavendra Mohanty, that sophisticated gentleman, famous lawyer, journalist, and writer, going in such a hurry? In the middle of the day, without an umbrella or walking stick? What could it mean?

Yes, he'd wonder.

He'd wonder, and he'd laugh.

I laughed, anyway, as I put the whole scene behind me and hurried on.

I hurried on till I reached the fruit seller who had set up his wares in front of the red building. I knew him from way back. Once, he had even had the nerve to insult me. As I reached my hand out to squeeze his fruit, he shouted at me to back off. As if I were some ordinary customer!

I was right in front of him; what choice did he have but either not to recognize me or to recognize me and not show his amazement by laughing. Never mind. I put that scene behind me, too, and hurried off.

Now I was done for. To my right was the Public Library and to my left was a row of bookstores. All my life I have been associated with books. Hour after hour I'd touch them, gently fondle them, take in their fragrance, and tease and cajole them to yield their innermost secrets to me quickly. There was nothing I could do; the place was crowded, and lots of people who were loitering around, reading or buying books, saw me. They would know me for sure, every bit of me was familiar to them, from the top of my head right down to my toes. Many were the times that my fellow journalists or fellow authors would crowd around me, breathing down my neck, if they so much as saw me bent over a book, afraid that I would get the better of them. Now, I wondered, how could they fail to notice my unusual progress through the city?

Once I had left Gandhi Road, I suppose I could have turned off Nehru Avenue and spared myself this. I didn't want to take side streets;

no one could accuse me of trying to run away and hide. But at least then I wouldn't have bumped into so many people I know, all in one place.

What's wrong? Isn't this the most direct way to the temple? So?

Oh. That's what it's all about, figuring out a road to take where no one will recognize me? Nehru Avenue is where the high court is located; how could Manavendra Mohanty, the great lawyer, go unnoticed there? And the same goes for the street where the Press Suprabhat is located, or any other street, lane, neighbourhood, or square, where men who use their brains eke out a living.

Is there any place in this city that hasn't been one of my haunts?

The red-light district? I had to laugh, despite myself. Don't forget, I've lived here ever since I was a child. And in between childhood and old age comes youth; I was once a passionate young man. Oh yes I was. Even old Manavendra Mohanty.

I didn't so much as glance to the right or the left. I didn't pay any mind to who was looking or laughing at me. I just kept right on going, running.

To tell you the truth, I wasn't all that anxious to get to the end of the street. Because .. because ... well, that was where the city of Gajanga in fact ended. Beyond that point loomed the unknown, unending ascent. The temple and the monkeys.

Once I started the climb, I wouldn't be able to look back.

I slowed my pace, but I still didn't look to the right or the left. My ears burned in the fierce heat of the midday sun; all around me I could hear familiar voices, but still I didn't look. My friend Babuni would be buying some book, tasting it first to see if he liked it; Professor Senapati would be making his endless notes; Kanduri, neither a poet nor a lawyer, would be loitering about; Dama Ratha, ever the philosopher, would be staring at the sun, puffing on his cigarette ... All my intellectual friends ... who could even count them all ... even I couldn't remember all of them. It was their familiar voices that I could hear all around me. Maybe one or two of them would recognize me; they would be surprised. Should I stop? If I did stop for awhile, would I lose my momentum?

The sounds swirled around me in the heat, battering against my ears and my eyes. Like small iron pellets let loose from a slingshot. I couldn't stand it any longer. Okay, I said, I'll look at you. Like Rama of old; just like King Rama, who looked out over the city he ruled and all his subjects, as he left them behind to begin his exile in the forest. I'll look back at you for a split second, and then ... and then I'll do whatever comes into my mind. No one will be able to stop me.

I turned around and looked.

I looked, and I saw that no one was looking at me. That there was no one who had seen me and was laughing at me.

I wiped the heat from my eyes and slowly, very slowly, looked at all the people. I couldn't see a single soul.

I knew it! I knew it! There was no one there. Not for me. There was no one there at all, as far as I was concerned: not by the shoe store, not at the fruit seller's, not in front of the library, not in the stores, not in front of me, not behind me, not to my right or my left. There had never been anyone, and there wasn't anyone there now. Old Manavendra Mohanty was a thing of the past, forgotten. Those who might have recognized him—all those white-haired old men, that troop of bald-headed old men—were all dead and gone. Dead and gone. And those that weren't dead and gone, were all at home, mesmerized by their young daughters-in-law. Occasionally, between a wheeze and a cough they might whisper, 'Bring me some betel. Bring me a glass of sherbet.' Useless old goats, not even death wanted them any more.

Maybe if I had stripped off all my clothes and crawled along the road stark naked, someone would have noticed me. But still no one would have recognized Manavendra Mohanty.

(The only one who would have cared was my son, maybe. His heart would have skipped a beat if he had seen me like that. What would his wife have done? Who knows? Maybe she would have bitten her tongue and fled from the scene. Or maybe she would have cried and wailed, beating her head in a frenzy of grief?)

My eyes were red in anger as I looked back now at Gajanga. Not like King Rama on his way to the forest at all. More like the irascible sage Durvasa. 'To hell with you,' I shouted. 'That's just what I expected.'

I kept repeating to myself:

I am the only one like me.

I am all alone.

I am the only one like me.

But I couldn't help feeling that just before I began my ascent to the temple, before the monkeys ripped my uniqueness to shreds, there was something I wanted to do. I wanted to cast a wide net and gather together all the city of Gajanga. I would see the power of seventy-five years of memory. I would jumble everyone together, heads butting against heads. This one's son would knock into that one's mother; the Brahman priest would bonk heads with the politician, the judge with the peasant farmer. I would make them see that they are all the same; everyone's the same. They are all a bunch of empty heads, brainless empty skulls like dried-out coconuts. My son's no different; so, he doesn't care about what his old father thinks, doesn't even bother to ask him any more? Well, Babuni's son is the same. And my pretty, young daughter-in-law, what's so special about her? So, when she looks at me she has to stifle a laugh? Well, Kanduri's daughter-in-law is no different. Swap clothes, swap jewellery, swap anything you want, swap jobs, swap families. It doesn't matter. Let one head knock against the other, and you'll see, they all make the same loud bonk. Empty inside, that's why. Like dried-out coconuts, just like I said. Young men are the same as old men? You bet. The only difference is that death is within our arm's reach. That's why the young respect the old. Keep them at a distance. But when we are gone, it will be their turn. They'll be the ones who get the respect. Death will stalk them. That's the way things go. Everything else about us, young and old, is exactly the same. Sex, lovelessness, money, selfishness, it's all the same reality. The same murky, smelly truth. Look into my net. I've caught them all in it; look

at how they struggle, restless to break loose. Ask them, ask them all—doesn't the mud stink? Doesn't it smell rotten?

Don't be angry; don't be mad. I just wanted to see all of you, all you people of Gajanga for one last time before I find that pure, odourless lie. I want to take a deep breath and once and for all get rid of seventy-five years of memory. So that I won't have left behind me any unnecessary refuse. So that I can shoot straight up like an arrow. Alone.

I would have done it sometime, if not today. I would have latched on to some lie or the other. But what can be more alluring than the lie of my own city's temple, of my own temple's monkeys?

What's more of a lie, the temple or the monkeys? What a question!

I cast that question to the winds and took my leave of Gajanga. I left them all behind and looked to the future. I could see the mountain, I could see the temple. I'm coming, I'm coming ... No one's recognized me ... Lucky thing.

(My son had already gone to his office. My daughter-in-law was visiting a neighbour. That was my chance to flee. Otherwise, who knows what might have happened?)

Daughter-in-law, that snack you left for me, I mean the offering you made to Death, you can give to your son. But be careful, careful, careful you don't kill him!

The road to the right leads straight to the provincial capital; from there it's a train ride, or a plane ride, or even a car ride to the national capital. Who knows how many times I've taken that road. Each time I came back with more wisdom and more money. I never took the road to the left; what could possibly be gained by taking the road to the temple and the monkeys?

It's true there was one thing I got more of, whether I went down that road or not. Old age. I got older and older. Was I now so old that I was ready to throw myself on the road to the left? No, it had nothing to do with age. It's just that I got it into my head I would go to the temple. That's all.

An indifferent family, a devoted daughter-in-law, whatever. It doesn't matter. Nothing can alter nature's course. I just got it into my head. That's all.

I keep telling you that. I don't understand why you won't believe me. Next you'll be telling me how a few days ago when my daughter-in-law made a cake (she lied, of course, and said she had made it just for me) and I took a bite of it, I seemed to look into her face and see vapid, cruel youthfulness. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. I wanted my old woman back in her young place. If she'd still been there, I wouldn't be such a dried-out old prune. And I wouldn't constantly be finding fault with myself for no good reason. Are you trying to tell me that it was then that I decided I had to get away from it all?

Let's go, let's go. No sense waiting any longer.

Praise be to Shiva! I took the road to the left. I can see the mountain. I'll see the temple. And before I see the temple ...

It didn't take me long to reach the foot of the mountain, maybe because my excitement was growing. I noticed that despite the fierce heat there were plenty of people walking in front of me and behind me. The road to the temple seemed just a continuation of the street through the shopping district of the city. Just another chapter in the book of selling and buying. Oh, Lord Shiva! Just because I am walking with the crowd, don't mistake me for one of them. They all think that you are real. The father, in fact, of that murky, smelly truth. You sit there on top of the mountain, squatting on your haunches. You eat the offerings, accept their devotion, and dispense hope. Like some judge. Like some astrologer. But I know that you are a lie, the aging father of the most pure, most beautiful lie of art and imagination.

You are no old bull of a monkey that can charge at me and scare me, so don't try it.

A leper, the obscene cry of the body, the craving for life. When I put some coins in the leper's hand, my mother screamed and pulled me away. Was that the first time the monkeys bared their teeth at me?

Today I dropped the coins into the leper's cup from a height. No one screamed. And I didn't so much as see the tail of a monkey flit by.

I climbed step by step and put coins in cup after cup, just like everyone else. From time to time, I had the strange feeling that there was some other almsgiver on the top step, looking down at me and smiling. A smile of acceptance and belonging. As if we had done this every day of our lives, indulged in our secret desires, and met here this way every day. Save me!

But what could I have done to correct such a big mistake? Should I have bent my head down in a woeful posture? I had felt something like a cool gush of water inside my chest; should I have made it stop rushing?

When I had climbed the first flight of stairs, I found myself in a square courtyard. There were stores selling offerings and stores selling Lord Shiva himself, where you could get photos of Shiva lingas, rosary beads, and books telling of Shiva's greatness. There were shops selling flowers and lamps, and lodgings for holy men. There was a huge banyan tree. Underneath the tree was a well; on top of the well was a plank of wood. On top of the wooden plank were the monkeys. It seemed as if the fierce heat of the sun hadn't touched this spot, as if the people there and all the monkeys (and there were more than one) didn't even know what heat or the burning sun really felt like. There was all kind of buying and selling of things that had to do with God; people seemed really serious. There were no grinning faces and no sense of fear in the air. The monkeys did show their teeth. They were looking at me. I didn't return their glance and went on buying some offerings. I did exactly what all the others were doing.

As I was buying my offerings, I noticed a young couple. They greeted me and advised me to buy the sweetmeats made from wheat flour; they said the sweets made from gram flour were not as good as they used to be. This was the first time on my pilgrimage that someone had seen me—recognized me. Acknowledged my good name and my talent. I bought the sugared sweets at their suggestion and felt content.

It dawned on me that they weren't staring at me or whispering to each other. They showed no sign of being surprised by my presence there. It was as if they found it completely natural that Manavendra

Mohanty would do something religious, come to the temple and buy something to offer Lord Shiva!

They were just children, really. Probably, they haven't had the occasion to read anything I had written, never heard any of my speeches. Their fathers and elder brothers had never told them anything in particular about my life as an uncompromising intellectual. Where had they gone now, anyway? Should I call out to them, 'Listen, today something really strange happened, today I got it into my head to come to the temple'?

Never mind. Sometimes it's fun to let people think whatever they want, even when you know it's nonsense. The judge knows exactly what the lawyer is thinking, and the two of them together make fools of the jury. I gave my fellow pilgrims a bland smile.

It occurred to me that I was enjoying myself more and more. Was this what they called 'ecstasy'?

That was when I noticed the two monkeys glaring at me, one on the right and one on the left. There was a desperate hunger in their eyes. I wasn't the slightest bit afraid. I called to them, 'Come, come. I can stare at you, too. I've been waiting for you for countless years, from some past birth long ago. Come, I'll scream, and you do whatever it is that you have to do. Come, what are you waiting for?'

The second flight of stairs was wet and slippery. As I climbed it, I could see the spire on top of the temple. I could hear the sound of the bell, the verses of some hymn, sung in a voice choked with emotion, and a flurry of exclamations of wonder and faith. From my mouth came these words, 'Oh, Lord Shiva! Take me to you!'

The pilgrims kept walking. I walked on. I was happy. It was as if we were all going together to one place to claim some prize, the young couple, with the man in his new shirt and the woman in her fashionable sari; the man with pinched features, calling out the name of God; the dark-skinned, fat peasant; the old man, all stooped over; the troop of schoolchildren in their short pants ...

It wasn't proper, I knew, for me to be enjoying this so much. I wasn't any less eager than the others, but somehow I wasn't one of them, one of the masses. Manavendra Mohanty is a cultured man, not some thoughtless devotee swept up in his emotions. No, no, not one of those.

Oh, Lord Shiva! Take me to you! I mean, lift me above these masses. That was what I heard myself saying.

There were even more monkeys now. They were jumping around in front of me, grinning, showing their ugly teeth. A small monkey threw a clod of earth at some man's shoulder and then leapt from tree to tree. The other monkeys were laughing; people joined them, laughing too. A huge male monkey snatched a banana from a plate of offerings someone was holding out, while another monkey rubbed its nose against the shirt of some well-dressed pilgrim and then wrapped itself around him, starting at his chest and neck and ending up curled around his feet. Another monkey was sitting in front of that young couple (or maybe it was another young couple like them—there's no dearth of young couples in this world), its tail spread out before it. It looked like it was trying to teach them the proper way to eat the red fruit that it held in its two hands. It seemed to me that the monkeys weren't going to let anyone escape. They were determined to terrorize everyone, rattle their plates of offerings, and spoil them all with their polluting touch. They wouldn't give up until they had done this. But the odd thing was that no one was afraid. Even I wasn't afraid! I kept saying, 'Come, come, I've been waiting for you since I was a child, even longer, through birth after birth, long, long ago. As long as you don't bite or scratch me, I won't be afraid and I won't be able to see God. I won't be able to sink down into the bliss of lies. For you are always there, lying in wait at every step to strike terror in me, to tease me, to scold me with the thought that there is still truth, filth, suffering. If you don't finish what you have to do, how will I ever reach the summit?'

Come, monkeys, come, please, please come, come and get me.

I was about to reach the top step. There was no monkey coming at me. That was when I knew. I knew that this was the proof, the final proof. That I am not like anyone else. That Manavendra Mohanty is not one of the masses; he hasn't come to get a prize from Lord Shiva. Great Shiva! I congratulate you on your discernment!

I was about to put my foot on the last step, when I saw before me the dark, cave-like interior of the temple with its burning lamp. Lord Shiva must be sitting there, looking at me. Suddenly it happened—without warning. What was to happen, happened. A monkey darted at me, fast as lightning, and in the twinkle of an eye stole one of my sugared sweetmeats. I felt the touch of its body against mine, I pulled myself together, but I was trembling all over. Was it in fear or in relief at the passing of fear, or even in joy? I couldn't say.

Before I entered the cave itself, I closed my eyes. It was as if I had let go of my existence; I was no longer anyone, no longer anyone and therefore no longer alone.

I stood there in the innermost recesses of the cave, my eyes shut tight. But I was conscious of the unusual combination of sounds, colours, and smells, of the rotting bananas, the red china roses, the sweet water that had been used to wash the feet of Shiva, the smoke and incense, the soft crying, the words of the mantras, the swishing sounds of the bats' wings. I sensed them all, how they surrounded me on all four sides! The retinue of Lord Shiva. I folded my hands in prayer. What can I tell you? Maybe if I had seen what was going on I could tell you.

But who said I didn't see anything? I saw. Not Lord Shiva. I saw the people. As I was looking at them, the crowd became denser and thicker. Among them I could make out one person, my old lady. But she wasn't an old lady any more; she was a lovely young girl, even younger than my daughter-in-law. And beautiful, very beautiful. She put her face against mine and laughed and laughed again. A naughty laugh, a teasing laugh, a seductive laugh. I said, 'What are you doing here? I've come

to see Lord Shiva.' She just laughed again, as if to say that she knew everything, the small-mindedness lurking behind my pretentiousness, the squalor of my grand desires.

'I bow before Shiva, who is a wishing tree that grants all desires.' I began to recite over and over again phrases from some hymn to Shiva that I had heard as a child. And she vanished into her own laughter. But Lord Shiva then granted me the vision of two others, my son and his wife. They were standing there with drawn, sad faces, as if they had done something wrong.

That was when Lord Shiva failed me. I opened my eyes and saw that they really were there in that crowd of the faithful. But they didn't have drawn, sad faces at all.

I didn't bother to ask what they were doing there. I assumed that they had come looking for me, to take me home. Someone on the streets of Gajanga must have recognized me and sent word to them. My daughter-in-law would have sent word to my son. Or my son to my daughter-in-law. That father had got mad and walked out again. Maybe Guna had messed up his papers again, or he had found a dead fly in his glass of sherbet again, or he had overheard someone in the front room bad-mouthing his generation, saying something true about it that he didn't want to hear. Clearly, something had happened that the old man hadn't been able to stand. My son would find some reason or the other, all stupid, all meaningless, to explain what had happened. There was a time when he would go and sit in the council chambers or in some sweet shop or on a park bench; this time, he was so mad he had walked all the way to the temple. Nothing special. Father may be an uncompromising intellectual, but he is still an old man. That was what he would think. Let him. I'm not just an old man, I'm his father. Not just his father, I'm his sainted mother's husband (and lover!), Lord Shiva reminded me.

I saw my happiness reflected on her face. The three of us turned back without a word.

I had no idea that my grandson Guna had come with them. Who knows where he had been, but now he came running and threw his arms around me.

'Grandpa! Help me. Monkeys!'

I bent down and took his tiny body in my arms. I looked him in the eye and told him not to be afraid. 'Don't be silly! You don't have to be afraid. From now on I'm going to come here every day, and I'll bring you with me.'

A celebrated writer takes an honest and uncompromising look at individuals and their tangled lives

Kishori Charan Das, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976, is an eminent Oriya author whose works have been widely translated. In this collection of nine short stories, Das observes the many facets of the Indian middle class, the choices they make, the disenchantments and anxieties that characterize their lives, their petty foibles and great expectations.

A father, who has found comfort in the stillness of a flower in his garden, silently battles his restless son; a simple tailor's unwavering faith in God is pitted against an educated lawyer's sense of intellectual superiority; a mother and daughter engage in unspoken recriminations and justifications as they strive to bridge years of distances; and a couple in the twilight of their lives spar with each other, bickering over shared memories as they move towards a semblance of understanding.

A dark and trenchant take on relationships, this collection depicts human nature in all its hypocrisies, deceptions, and frailties as the protagonists struggle for something meaningful in the ordinariness of existence.

Translated by Phyllis Granoff

Cover design by Sumit Bhattacharya



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